‘March Separately but Strike Together’

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The use of the united front tactic by Trotskyists in French trade unions

by

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Contents

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Declaration

I confirm that this thesis is entirely my own work, does not contain work already submitted for another degree and has not been submitted for a degree at another university.

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Abstract.

This study is an attempt to fill the lacuna left by the lack of detailed research into the use, by French Trotskyist trade union militants, of the agitational tactic known as the united front. I analyse the manner in which the tactic has been used, evaluate its success or otherwise and assess whether it continues to be of relevance for Trotskyists in the present day. I make use of a range of sources, including archived primary materials and documented memoirs of participants, contemporary media reports, academic research and interviews with Trotskyist activists.

An examination of the theory and development of the united front is undertaken, followed by an evaluation of its practical implementation, through consideration of a number of case studies from different periods in the twentieth century. These are, firstly, the short-lived Hotchkiss strike committee, established during the 1936 Popular Front period. Secondly, I evaluate two examples from the immediate post-war period, the Caudron factory workers' council between 1944 and 1948, and the strike committee established during the Renault factory strike of 1947. Thirdly, I consider the united fronts, in the form of workers' *coordinations*, during the period between 1986 and 1995.

I draw out and highlight common features between the united fronts, and assess whether or not the tactic made an effective contribution to the winning of industrial disputes by workers and whether, in the process, it enabled Trotskyist activists to generate a receptive audience for their wider political and social ideas.

Finally, I consider whether the building of united fronts continues to be a realistic, relevant, practical tactic for Trotskyists in the French trade unions, and one which assists them to effectively pursue their stated longer-term goal of a revolutionary transformation of society.

Abbreviations

AG	Assemblées générales
AMR	Alliance marxiste révolutionnaire
BDIC	Bibliothèque de documentation internationale contemporaine
CAP	Commissions administratives paritaires
CCI	Comité communiste internationaliste
CCP	Commission consultative paritaire
CDL	Comité départemental de la libération
CEC	Commission exécutive centrale
CEDIAS	Centre d'études, de documentation, d'information et d'action sociales
CERMTRI	Centre d'études et de recherches sur les mouvements trotskyste et révolutionnaires internationaux
CEVIPOF	Centre de recherches politiques de Sciences Po
CFDT	Confédération française démocratique du travail
CFE-CGC	Confédération française de l'encadrement - Confédération générale des cadres
CFTC	Confédération française des travailleurs chrétiens
CGT	Confédération générale du travail
CGT-FO	Confédération générale du travail - Force ouvrière
CGTU	Confédération générale du travail unitaire
CHS	Centre d'histoire sociale
CNAC	Coordination nationale des agents de conduite
CNIC	Coordination nationale intercatégories des cheminots
CNT	Confédération nationale du travail

CRC	Coordonner Rassembler Construire
CSR	Comités syndicalistes révolutionnaires
ECCI	Enlarged Executive of the Communist International
FSU	Fédération syndicale unitaire
GBL	Groupe bolshevik-léniniste
GC	Gauche communiste
KPD	Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands
LC	Ligue communiste
LCR	Ligue communiste révolutionnaire
LO	Lutte ouvrière
MPPT	Mouvement pour un parti des travailleurs
MRP	Mouvement républicain populaire
NPA	Nouveau Parti anticapitaliste
OCI	Organisation communiste internationale
OU	Opposition unitaire
PCF	Parti communiste français
PCI	Parti communiste internationaliste
POI	Parti ouvrier internationaliste
POIn	Parti ouvrier indépendant
POUM	Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista
PRS	Parti républicain, radical et radical-socialiste
PS	Parti socialiste
PSOP	Parti socialiste ouvrier et paysan

PSU	Parti socialiste unifié
PT	Parti des travailleurs
RADAR	Rassembler, diffuser les archives de révolutionnaires
RDR	Rassemblement démocratique révolutionnaire
RPF	Rassemblement du peuple français
RPR	Rassemblement pour la République
SDR	Syndicat démocratique Renault
SFIC	Section française de l'internationale communiste
SFIO	Section française de l'internationale ouvrière
SNCAN	Société nationale de construction aéronautique du Nord
SoB	Socialisme ou Barbarie
SPD	Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands
SUD	Solidaires Unitaires Démocratiques
SUD-PTT	Solidaires Unitaires Démocratiques-PTT
UC	Union communiste
UNSA	Union nationale des syndicats autonomes

Chapter One

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to examine the use of the agitational and organisational approach known as the united front, by Trotskyist militants within the French trade union movement. In doing so I ask, referring to the criteria that Trotskyists themselves employ, whether it has been an effective tactic in the workplace. Has it allowed them to intervene successfully in the trade unions, win industrial disputes and build a receptive audience for their political and social ideas? Has its use enabled them to attract increasing numbers of members to their organisations and thus move nearer to their stated aim of a revolutionary transformation of society? Having explored how and why the tactic was formulated by Russian revolutionaries in the early part of the twentieth century, I consider case studies demonstrating the practical application of the united front by Trotskyists in France and highlight their underlying common features. Making reference to the case studies I then consider the effectiveness of the application of the tactic by militants during different historical periods and in different circumstances. Using information obtained from primary sources, including interviews with contemporary Trotskyist activists, other militants and some secondary sources, I ascertain whether the application of the united front can still be of realistic and practical relevance to French trade unionists in the present day and can enable activists to further their industrial and political goals.

I take the united front to mean a particular tactic used by political parties, pressure groups or individuals who consider themselves to be revolutionaries, situated on the far left – that is to the left of the Communist Party – when

endeavouring to build coalitions in the workplace, trade union or wider political environment. Such undertakings are begun with the intention of achieving a common aim by creating democratic unity in action between different groups of rank-and-file workers whether they be deemed 'revolutionaries', 'reformists' or politically non-aligned. In this sense the united front is not an approach which is imposed from above and in most cases is created as a temporary alliance in which each of the participants maintains their own distinct identities. The Trotskyist participants in a united front would anticipate being able to demonstrate what they see as the shortcomings of social democratic or reformist ideas, terms which I discuss below, and in doing so be able to build political influence and win workers over to what they regard as their revolutionary position. The united front is therefore of prime importance to such activists and, according to Trotsky, it forms part of the 'highest expression of proletarian strategy' (Breitman and Lovell 1975, 51).

Throughout the study I use terms such as Marxist, revolutionary, reformist, social democratic, Trotskyist and Stalinist. It is important to arrive at a working definition of these terms in order to ensure clarity and thus avoid any confusion in the mind of the reader. My analysis, method and interpretation have from the outset been from a Marxist perspective. This in itself is a term open to a great deal of controversy and differences of opinion, and indeed, as Marx himself once noted when referring to the interpretation of his ideas by French socialist Paul Lafargue, 'All I know is that I am not a Marxist' (Engels 1882).[1] My

[1]References to works by Marx, Engels, Lenin and Trotsky and the Communist International documents are in most cases through the Marxist Internet Archive (MIA) website. This online archive has an ever growing selection of writings from the majority of Marxist, Socialist and

interpretation of Marxism is therefore, only one of many, and one which concentrates on different possible tactics and strategies within what the militants in question regard as a broader struggle for socialism.

It can be argued that there can be no impartial history and that 'the historian who claims to be impartial is a fraud' (Hallas 1971, 2). I would agree with that statement and as noted at the beginning of this chapter, I present, examine and analyse the case studies from what I consider to be a Marxist perspective. More conventional approaches to the examination of industrial relations in twentieth century France, while giving the impression of impartiality, such as that provided by Howell when discussing the development of rank and file worker representation, often do so from a position which uncritically accepts the demand from industry for '[t]he introduction of flexibility, and hence a broader post-Fordist restructuring of the French economy' (Howell 2009, 248). Academic political scientists and researchers such as Dominique Andolfatto, while recognising that militants from the far-left stress 'l'accent sur le militantisme de proximité, les actions locales, l'écoute directe des revendications des salariés' (Andolfatto 2004, 79) nevertheless tend, in the name of objectivity, to remain removed from any day-to-day practical involvement with the activists in question. Other writers, such as Christophe Nick, take a confrontational approach towards Marxism and towards Trotskysism in particular. He sees Trotskyist agitation inside the trade union movement and political parties as nothing less than a fraudulent conspiracy in which 'les trotskistes tirent les ficelles de la gauche française. Dans l'ombre de l'appareil d'État, au cœur des syndicats et des

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Anarchist writers. References using the MIA cite only author and date. The hyperlink in the Bibliography will direct the reader to the relevant text.

medias, ils gangrènent les mouvements sociaux, grèves et associations' (Nick 2002, 9). Jean-Pierre le Goff is even more anti-Trotskyist in his writings. Associating Trotskyism directly with terrorism and totalitarianism, he maintains that while agitating inside trade unions and the wider social movements Trotskyists 'masque leur utopie meurtrière en gommant ses aspects les plus voyants, et tentent de présenter une image plus lisse et adaptée' (Le Goff 2004, 50). He asserts that, '[l]'idéologie marxiste et communiste[2] est en ruine' (Le Goff 2004, 52), the 'class struggle' is a delusion and no matter how Trotskyists attempt to present their interventions as democratic and liberating, their tactics and ideology condemns them to remain in a 'ghetto mental qui les met à l'abri de l'épreuve du réel' (Le Goff 2004, 50).

The tactic of the united front is an integral component of Marxist and Trotskyist theory and while it would have been possible to examine this from a non-Marxist perspective, such as those outlined above, or even from one which opposes any form of over-arching historical explanation or metanarrative, it seemed more appropriate to examine the historical facts concerning the use of the tactic from a more compatible perspective.

The tradition I am examining in this thesis is therefore one that sees itself as part of the 'revolutionary' heritage in that it stands for the overthrow of capitalism through mass political and industrial action and is distinct from that of the other major socialist tradition prevalent inside the workers' movement, namely a less radical and more gradualist approach often simply termed 'reformism'. The latter approach sees socialism as an evolutionary process achieved on workers' behalf,

[2] Within which he includes Trotskyism.

'from above' and mainly through parliamentary democracy via the established electoral system. During this process workers can press for reforms, hence the epithet 'reformism', in order to ameliorate the worst excesses of capitalism. In France both socialist traditions worked together in an uneasy alliance as the *Section française de l'internationale ouvrière* (SFIO) until the revolutionaries, influenced by the 1917 Bolshevik revolution in Russia, broke away to form the *Section française de l'internationale communiste* (SFIC), better known as the *Parti communiste français* (PCF)[3] in 1921. The reformists maintained the name SFIO until 1969 when they became *le Parti socialiste* (PS). Confusingly, during the latter part of the nineteenth century and until 1917, both traditions were, as indeed were the majority of those advocating socialism, known as social democrats. Following the creation of avowedly revolutionary Communist Parties, the remaining reformist parties maintained the social democratic designation. I thus use the terms reformist and social democratic interchangeably. A third tradition that was particularly significant in the early French workers' movement was one that campaigned for revolutionary change by means of the trade union movement and the establishment of a 'collectivised worker-managed socio-economic order to be run by unions' (Darlington 2008, 5), without direct recourse to political parties or the state. This tradition, with its roots in Proudhonist anarchism, had a significant influence in the early development of the *Confédération générale du travail* (CGT); I refer to this as 'revolutionary syndicalism.'

[3] The *Parti communiste* did not include *français* in its name until 1936. However for the sake of consistency and to avoid confusion I have from the beginning used the designation *Parti communiste français* or PCF.

By the second half of the 1920s there had developed within the international Communist movement an opposition grouping to the increasingly hegemonic leadership and policies of Joseph Stalin. With Leon Trotsky as the most prominent leader it became known as the Left Opposition. Similar debates and disputes to those happening in the Soviet Union between Stalinists and Trotskyists were also occurring in Communist Parties internationally. Members of the Left Opposition were eventually forced to resign or be expelled from the party. In France these divisions were replicated inside both the PCF and the wider workers' movement, especially within the CGT trade unions. Trotskyists claimed then, as now, that they were continuing the revolutionary international Communist traditions of the Bolsheviks from the time of the 1917 Russian Revolution, which they maintained had been destroyed through the rise to power of Stalin. Just as in debates about the nature of Marxism, however, there are many interpretations of these traditions. This, in conjunction with varying analyses of Trotsky's writings, has led to much dispute about the term Trotskyist itself.[4] Furthermore, Western literature on Trotsky has been 'intellectually uneven and politically variegated' (Cox 1992, 86).[5] Hallas, a writer sympathetic to Trotsky, claims (1979, 5) that his theoretical contribution was centered on the following key areas:

- The theory of Permanent Revolution, including the 'law of combined and uneven' development of capitalism and the importance of internationalism to the workers' movement.

[4] See Cox (1992, 84 -102).
[5] For summary outlines of Trotsky's life and writings see: Alexander (1991), Bensaïd (2002), Broué (1988), Callinicos (1990), Cliff (1990), Deutscher (1954, 1959, 1963), Hallas (1979) and Mandel (1979).

- The outcome of the Russian revolution, an analysis of the USSR under Stalin and criticism of his concept of 'socialism in one country.'
- The nature of the revolutionary party and the strategies and tactics – including the united front – it uses in a variety of situations. The relationship between the revolutionary party, the working class and mass workers' organisations.

Crucial to Trotsky's work was the interconnectedness and dialectical relationship between the different elements cited above. In making an analysis of society and class relationships he maintained it was necessary to have an appreciation of how each circumstance and element linked to the totality. Underlying all however, was the primacy of the working class as motor for revolutionary change. An understanding and interpretation of Trotskyism, which sees it as a guide rather than a set of prescriptive commands, is the one favoured by this author.

More often than not the differing interpretations of his work have developed as a result of disagreements between individuals or small groups within the Trotskyist movement itself. Often these competing views have arisen due to changing economic, social or political circumstances and differences of opinion over the perspectives or tactics needed at these times to build a revolutionary organisation. When no accommodation could be found between the competing factions, splits, breakaways and expulsions have invariably occurred. This has been particularly so since Trotsky's assassination in 1940. Today in France there are an estimated 20 groups claiming to be part of the Trotskyist heritage. Some of them have only a handful of supporters and one or two others have a

membership of several hundred activists.[6] For the purpose of this study I will limit my focus to the organisations which have represented the three most important strands of French Trotskyism and thus played a more significant part in the French trade union movement than any of the other groups, namely the strands represented today by the *Nouveau Parti anticapitaliste* (NPA)[7], *Lutte ouvrière* (LO) and the *Parti ouvrier indépendant* (POIn).[8] Of the three parties the NPA and its forerunner the LCR have proved to be the most open and approachable in terms of responding to my requests for interviews, meetings, access to archive material and other documentation. I have therefore taken the majority of examples from this source, particularly when examining events from 1968 onwards.

Throughout the twentieth century, the French labour movement has been marked by mass mobilisations of strikers and angry protest movements, interspersed with periods of industrial and social calm. Notwithstanding all the media, political and eventual academic attention devoted to industrial disputes, analysis of the precise strategies and tactics used by union activists during these disputes is very sparse. Research carried out for *La Documentation Française*, for example by Andolfatto (2004), details the historical development of the French trade union movement and makes reference to key periods of industrial unrest and the macro strategies used by the different confederations, but consideration of agitational

[6] 'Leftist Parties of the World'. <www.broadleft.org> [accessed 6 January 2008]
[7] This new party, formed in 2009, has as the majority of its membership activists from the former *Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire* (LCR). The NPA aims to attract those who may not yet consider themselves to be 'revolutionaries' but who are nevertheless convinced that the social democratic parties (PS, PCF) offer no prospect of destroying capitalism in order to bring about the socialist transformation of society.
[8] Up until 1 June 2008 the *Parti Ouvrier Indépendant* was known as the *Parti des Travailleurs (PT).*

methods used by rank-and-file union activists is absent. A similar approach is taken by two classic histories of the CGT by Dreyfus (1995) and Barjonet (1968). Regular research carried out for the *Ministère de l'emploi*, such as that by Carlier and Tenret (2007), Arnossé (2006), into the relationships between employers and trade unions produces much data into the causes, types, negotiations around and resolutions of industrial disputes. The *Ministère de l'emploi* also publishes annually the results of elections to factory and works councils. But while this work recognises the importance of grass-roots union representatives it does not describe the agitational methods and mechanisms used by militants leading up to or during industrial disputes. On the other hand, work by writers overtly sympathetic to the trade union movement such as Béroud and Mouriaux (1997), does mention the significance of unity between workers and the importance of the frequently heard slogan '*tous ensemble!'* Describing aspects of the 1995 strike wave, they suggest that the initially unexpected extension and generalisation of the movement led workers to develop 'une conscience unitaire' (Béroud and Mouriaux 1997, 155). More detached analysis is rare.

The call for united action was a common theme during the events of December 1995, when, over a period of four weeks, France saw its largest strike wave since 1968. Béroud and Mouriaux are in no doubt that such demands are part of the tradition of union activism in France, comparing it to similar actions during the Popular Front of 1936. However, while they do not mention the role played by the far left in its development they do see the need for more than an unspecified and vague call for unity amongst workers:

> Le "tous ensemble" n'est pas donné d'emblée. Il est à construire et la construction est difficile. Tous ensemble, oui mais avec qui, sur quelles bases, sous quelles conditions, dans quel but, en admettant quels compromis (Béroud and Mouriaux 1997, 163).

Similarly, in the collection of studies of the 1995 strike wave by Leneveu and Vakaloulis (1998), frequent mention is made of the desire by grass-roots militants to engage in united action with other workers in different industries and how such united action gave the movement strength:

> Au fil des manifestations, les banderoles unitaires d'entreprises et d'établissements ont remplacé souvent les banderoles par syndicats, témoignant ainsi de la volonté des grévistes d'agir ensemble (Leneveu and Vakaloulis 1998, 33).

Examples are cited of the crucial role played by *assemblées générales*[9] (AG) which were distinguishing features of the strike movement, and how these were able to influence the positions taken by the established trade unions. They note that a certain wariness existed vis-à-vis the existing trade union machinery and while this did not extend to a rejection of the official unions altogether it did lead to the development of directly accountable decision-making structures by the rank and file in order to unify and actively involve the widest possible number of workers, many of whom did not belong to any trade union. Forming *coordinations*[10] between workers in different industries and unions and making daily use of AG were seen as ways of promoting and controlling united action through direct democracy at the base. Leneveu and Vakaloulis regard them as

[9] Mass meetings of all the workers in a particular workplace usually, though not always, organised by trade union shop stewards.

[10] A localised temporary unofficial autonomous body established during periods of industrial or political disputes which unites elected delegates from a range of workplaces or industries. Delegates chosen by mass meetings can reflect the full range of trade union and political affiliations present in a workplace.

reflecting a desire for unity by rank-and-file workers, but their study does not examine at any point the specific political positions taken by these workers or whether this search for united action was a result of any overt reference to the tactic of the united front. This omission, however, does not occur in the extensive study of the history, development and structure of the *coordinations* of the 1980s by Denis (1996, 44). This work describes these autonomous organisations built by rank-and-file militants as types of united front. Furthermore Denis recognises that the inspiration behind the moves to create them came mainly from the revolutionary left and, from the mid-1970s onwards, through the activities of Trotskyists in particular: 'Sur l'échiquier politique, il s'agit généralement de militants d'extrême-gauche, appartenant soit à la LCR soit à LO' (Denis 1996,72).

The vast majority of workers in France who are in a trade union belong to one of the five major union confederations: CFDT, CFE-CGC, CFTC, CGT, CGT-FO.[11] Ever since the founding of the CGT in 1895 some workers have rejected these large confederations and have instead joined smaller, more radical 'autonomous' or non-confederated unions such as the present-day UNSA (*L'union nationale des syndicats autonomes)*, *Le Groupe des Dix (Solidaires)* and FSU (*Fédération syndicale unitaire*). However, compared to other European countries France has a relatively low percentage of workers in trade unions. Figures published by the *Ministère de l'emploi, du travail et de la cohésion sociale* showed that in 2003

[11] Respectively the *Confédération française démocratique du travail*, *Confédération française de l''encadrement - Confédération générale des cadres, Confédération française des travailleurs chrétiens, Confédération générale du travail and the Confédération générale du travail - Force ouvrière.*

only 8 per cent of French workers were unionised,[12] half the number compared to twenty five years earlier (DARES 2004, 1) but nevertheless a percentage which has remained stable since 1996 (DARES 2008, 2). Despite this apparently low figure there are union representatives in 38 per cent of all workplaces with more than twenty employees (DARES 2007, 1).

The case studies I have selected examine different practical applications of the united front and are from three different periods, two of which represent high points in union membership and involvement, and the third from a period when union membership in France was in decline. Reference is made to the wider political events occurring at the time and how these developments affected the Trotskyist movement.

It has been argued that French 'modern political history is clearly dominated by revolt and conflict' (Hewlett 1998, 33). The three episodes I examine in this study do indeed demonstrate significant degrees of conflict, social upheaval and what might be termed class struggle. The form they took resulted in part from particularities of the socio-economic and political situations in France during the historical periods in question. These situations were in turn determined by the position of France within developments in the international political and economic state of the world. Similar, though not exact, episodes could have and sometimes did occur in other countries.

[12] Compared to 29.1 per cent in Britain (Hicks and Palmer 2004) and 80 per cent in Sweden (DARES 2004).

In each of the three historical periods the international economy had recently experienced and / or continued to experience major crises triggering social strife as well: the 'Great Depression' of the 1930s, the end of World War 2 and the oil crisis and recession of the 1980s. These had all resulted in periods of falling living standards with sharp increases in unemployment, wage restrictions and cuts to welfare benefits. It was in response to these crises that trade union activists in France started to organise industrial action in order to defend or enhance working conditions and standards of living more generally. The opportunities provided by these upsurges in industrial and social militancy enabled Trotskyists in all three cases to pose more radical political perspectives than those promoted by the larger, established workers' parties, the SFIO and the PCF.

The most rapid growth in trade union membership occurred in the period of the 1936 Popular Front, and I take my first case study from this period. Internationally, this period was characterised by the rise of fascism and challenges to the empires and spheres of influence of the established imperial powers such as France, Britain and the USA, most obviously from Germany, Italy and Spain, but also by the military government in Japan. Their responses to these challenges, as well as to that posed by the seeming continued economic growth and political influence of the USSR, had a marked influence upon the direction and outcomes of the industrial and political struggles in France throughout the period of the Popular Front. The case study examines the workers' strike committee created during the strike and occupation at the Hotchkiss factory in the Paris suburb of Levallois. Despite the 'mentalité

favorable à la syndicalisation' (Prost 1964, 163), less than half of the population were in unions at this time, with the CGT attracting 39 per cent of workers (Andolfatto 2004, 23). The second case study focuses on the immediate post-war period, when the majority of French workers were members of a trade union. It is comprised of two parts and examines the interventions made by different Trotskyist organisations. These are firstly, in the workers' committee established at the Caudron-Renault factory in Issy-les-Moulineaux between 1944 and 1948 and secondly in the strike committee set up during the April to May 1947 strike at the Renault (Billancourt) factory. In 1946 the CGT claimed that it had 5.8 million members or 53 per cent of the working population (Andolfatto 2004, 22), a figure it has never since surpassed. By the end of this period, Communists in France and Italy had been obliged to leave government and the world had entered what became known as the Cold War, as it divided itself into Western and Soviet blocs, with NATO and the Warsaw Pact being military expressions of this divide. The Western economies soon began a prolonged period of economic boom, known in France as the *trente glorieuses*. In France the division of the world into two competing blocs produced a fracture in the trade union movement, with one part, the CGT, almost entirely controlled by the PCF and another, the CGT-FO influenced by the SFIO and other anti-Communists. The PCF, however, saw its support and influence reach a peak during this time, while that of the Trotskyists on the other hand, plummeted to a low from which it was to not begin to recover before 1968. The only real opportunities open to them during this nadir came about from involvement in the anti-colonial struggles of the time, particularly when organising opposition to French involvement in Algeria.

The third case study comes from the period between the mid-1980s up to the end of 1995 and examines the autonomous workers' co-ordinations and alternative trade union structures established during this time. At the start of this ten-year period trade union membership had fallen to 12 per cent of the workforce, dropping to 8 per cent by the beginning of 1996. The most striking international events during this period resulted from the collapse of the Soviet bloc from 1989 onwards. For the PCF this contributed to the start of a marked decline in membership and electoral success as well as diminishing influence within the trade union movement. Conversely, Trotskyists saw the beginnings of a renewed growth in influence as their economic, social and political viewpoints were reappraised by trade unionists and social commentators.[13] The *coordinations* built during the industrial disputes of this period, were a development of the earlier forms of united front and initially were much influenced by workers on the far-left including those in Trotskyist parties.

All three periods were marked by major industrial unrest and importantly also corresponded to times when Trotskyists were able to agitate openly and play a significant role within the union movement, despite at times facing opposition and even outright hostility from members of the PCF. They correspond to the periods when Trotskyist influence was at its greatest although they still represented only a small minority of activists inside the trade union and wider workers' movement. For this reason I have not attempted to use examples from the massive general strike of May 1968. It could be argued that the nature of many of the spontaneous protests and strikes during the initial stages of the

[13] Despite the pronouncements by Francis Fukuyama from 1989 onwards about the *End of History*.

events of May 1968 were characterised by students or workers coming together in united fronts; that such spontaneity did occasionally give rise to some 'comités de grève élus échappant au contrôle des syndicats' (Gobille 2008, 37), built from the bottom up and comprised of both unionised and non-affiliated workers, is certainly correct. But for the most part these were very rapidly brought under the control of the official union apparatuses and did not develop further. Without doubt, the events of May 1968 proved to be a turning point, not only in France but on a world scale. Marxist ideas, including those of Trotsky and the heritage of earlier revolutions were brought to the fore once again. However, Trotskyists were at this time for the most part confined to the margins of trade unions and unable to have any influence in workplaces, although one group, the *Organisation communiste internationale* (OCI), had an influential shop steward, Yvon Rocton, in the Sud-Aviation factory in Nantes. His activism led to the factory being credited with being the first of many to be occupied by strikers during this time (Rousseau 2006).

During periods of minor industrial disputes the militancy and actions of striking and demonstrating trade unionists are channelled and largely determined through the official apparatus of the union confederations. However this ability to control and direct the union membership has repeatedly come into question at times of major outbreaks of industrial unrest, as I will demonstrate in the case studies. Rank-and-file union members have used their own more direct and immediately accountable grass-roots methods of organisation and in doing so have bypassed the official union mechanisms. Workplace or shop floor AG, as described above, can be used for this purpose, allowing all workers, whether unionised or not, to

voice their opinions and take decisions about their immediate views and concerns. Trotskyists have been able to intervene in such cases and use them as the basis for building local united fronts.

Within workplaces and unions some members will of course be more militant or 'class conscious' than others. Indeed at any one time individual trades unionists will reflect many of the opinions and ideas prevailing in society as a whole. In the often fast moving scenario of an industrial dispute opinions will be divided over the way forward or the best tactic to employ. Previously-held positions will come under scrutiny and be challenged and new ones developed. Some individuals will be prepared to search for compromise with regards employers or the government; others may take more confrontational or radical positions. Some may want to confine debate to purely economic issues affecting union members, some may want to introduce a political aspect into the dispute and still others may see the dispute as an opportunity to promote an overtly radical or revolutionary agenda which questions the existing economic and social order. It is under these circumstances and at such times of fluidity and shifting ideas that the possibility of creating a united front can be seen as being the most appropriate way in which to bring workers together. For Trotskyists the creation of a united front allows them the opportunity to test both their ideas and those of reformists. This is done in the hope that they can demonstrate what they see as the inadequacies of reformist ideas and conversely the validity of their more militant or revolutionary propositions.

As we shall see, during the strikes of 1936, 1948, 1986 and 1995 such debates were commonplace on the shop floor. Indeed it was militant action by rank-and-file workers, at least in the initial stages, that led in each of these periods to the eventual widespread explosion of strikes, protests, and even factory occupations. Political questions relating to the existing social and economic order were brought to the fore and were widely discussed, such questions ultimately playing an integral part in the development and eventual outcomes of the industrial unrest. The trade union hierarchies and bureaucracies involved in these examples were at first ignored or sidelined by local strike meetings and AG, which resulted in some cases in the establishment, by rank-and-file worker militants across different workplaces and industries, of autonomous strike committees, factory councils and networks of activists. Many of these associations were initiated by militants from parties to the left of the two main political parties, the Socialist and Communist Parties, which had traditionally dominated the major union confederations. A significant number of these militants allied themselves with the political ideals of revolutionary socialism, ideals characterised, I suggest, by an emphasis on workers' self activity and socialism from below, as defined by Draper (1976).

A major debate running through French trade unions ever since their foundation at the beginning of the 20th century, has pertained to the independence of unions and their relationship towards political parties and the state apparatus. Some have argued that the unions should only concern themselves with purely economic questions. Others have argued that it is impossible to do this while ignoring wider political issues or ideological questions. Another recurring debate,

favoured by the revolutionary syndicalist tradition, is over whether the unions have a dual role, on the one hand protecting and improving workers' conditions of work and on the other, working for a transformation of society from capitalist to socialist. This dual role was enshrined in the statement of principles adopted in 1906 by the CGT in what has become known as the *Charte d'Amiens*:

> Dans l'œuvre revendicatrice quotidienne, le syndicalisme poursuit la coordination des efforts ouvriers, l'accroissement du mieux-être des travailleurs par la réalisation d'améliorations immédiates, telle que la diminution des heures de travail, l'augmentation des salaires etc. Mais cette besogne n'est qu'un côté de l'œuvre du syndicalisme : il prépare l'émancipation intégrale, qui ne peut se réaliser que par l'expropriation capitaliste.[14]

As Ridley notes (1970, 83), this dual role also meant that the economic and political objectives of the CGT over the short and long term were concurrently of 'a reformist and a revolutionary character'. The three major trade union confederations of today, CGT, CFDT, FO and others such as those within the *Solidaires* group, make reference to this notion of independence in their founding statutes. Awareness of the debates surrounding this issue, together with an understanding of the notions of reform and revolution, is therefore useful for a fuller appreciation of the positive and negative accomplishments of Trotskyist intervention inside the French trade union and wider workers' movements. In addition, this thesis will consider notions such as workers' self-emancipation, rank-and-file organisation and socialism from below. These ideas will be

[14] See Appendix 2, *La Charte d'Amiens*

explored through the historical context and wider political developments surrounding each of the case studies.

When workers are in dispute with management or with opponents more generally they invariably look to unite their forces and in doing so, as noted above, they have often developed their own rank-and-file organisations in order to be able to bypass the perceived inertia, corruption or limitations in the existing union or political structures. The political practice of the far left has aimed to capitalise on this disenchantment and has repeatedly focused on the need for rank-and-file workers to develop autonomous grass-roots organisations, arguing for an expansion of direct democracy and the necessity of unity in action with a variety of working class organisations. In this respect the early French Communist Party set the trend[15] for the decades to follow. A particular organisational method used by these early Communists which had its roots in both the syndicalist and Russian Bolshevik traditions[16], and which did stress the need for unity in action, was developed into the tactic of the united front. This tactic was to become a defining characteristic, particularly of the more radical elements within the Communist Party, and was then later refined by the Trotskyists. An explanation or formalisation of what the united front meant was proposed and accepted by the Fourth Congress of the Communist International[17] in 1922. The *Theses on Comintern Tactics* described a united front as being:

[15] I maintain that it later abandoned the emphasis on rank-and-file democratic autonomy, replacing it with an inflexible top-down hierarchical structure.
[16] See Darlington (2008) for a recent analysis of the relationship between the two traditions.
[17] The Comintern. Founded in 1919 by the Russian Communist Party in an attempt to unite revolutionary opponents of capitalism from around the world. Also known as the Third International.

> … an initiative whereby the Communists propose to join with all workers belonging to other parties and groups and all unaligned workers in a common struggle to defend the immediate, basic interests of the working class against the bourgeoisie. Every action, for even the most trivial everyday demand, can lead to revolutionary awareness and revolutionary education; it is the experience of struggle that will convince workers of the inevitability of revolution and the historic importance of Communism (Communist International 1922a).

The appendix to the *Comintern Tactics* document, the *Theses on the United Front*, outlined in detail how this implied the creation of the 'broadest and fullest possible unity (of workers) in practical activity' and the creation of agreements between different workers' parties in order to achieve 'the unity of all workers willing to fight against capitalism' (Communist International 1922b). However, it went on to state clearly that Communists should at all time maintain their ideological independence and be free to question or criticise the leadership and direction of such 'united workers' fronts.' In doing so they were thus applying Lenin's slogan from 1905: '[m]arch separately but strike together' (Lenin, 1905c). A united front is therefore intended to bring workers together who have a common demand, whether this is at a national party level or at a local workplace level. The aim could be a short-term, partial objective such as agitation for a pay rise or improved working conditions, or it could be a more long-term political objective such as campaigning against war or racism. While attempting to achieve the common aims of any united front, the ultimate purpose of such alliances for revolutionaries is also to encourage active participation by rank-and-file workers and through this to demonstrate the shortcomings of reformist leaders, thereby attracting workers to a revolutionary position. The concept and

development of the united front as a tactic is discussed in greater detail in the next chapter.

The history and the growth (and subsequent decline) of the PCF has been well documented (Wohl 1966, Kriegel 1969, Robrieux 1984, Lazar 2005), as has that of the CGT (Lefranc 1967, Barjonet 1968, Bron 1970, Dreyfus 1995, Andolfatto 2004, Mouriaux 2004), with studies expressing the full range of political standpoints. It is not the intention of this study to repeat any of this work, but reference will be made to other research where appropriate in order to allow a full appreciation of the historical background and circumstances in which Trotskyists found themselves.

One could argue quite plausibly that the Trotskyist movement in France was one of the most influential in the world from the mid-1920s to the late-1930s. This may continue to be the case today, at least in terms of electoral success. Since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the subsequent decline of Soviet Russia and its satellites there has been a certain reappraisal and rediscovery of Trotskyism. The revival of militancy amongst a new generation of French trade unionists since 1995 has to some extent been a reflection of these wider political developments. This has led to the publication of a number of studies about the far left, but these have often been limited to memoirs written by existing or former militants from the different organisations laying claim to the Trotskyist heritage (Craipeau 1971, 1999, Naville 1975, Thourel 1980, Turpin 1988, Minguet 1997, Zeller 2000, Bensaïd 2000, Krivine 2006). These have been complemented by studies originating for the most part from the standpoint of journalists looking to

expose youthful indiscretions of present-day mainstream politicians or others in the public eye such as artists, musicians, academics, or indeed of journalists (Koch 1999, Pingaud 2000, Charpier 2002, Nick 2002). It is however possible to utilise, albeit with caution, some of these histories of the far left, which – while they may be written from a partisan perspective – are nevertheless useful in allowing the reader to appreciate the influence of Trotskyists and their allies in the trade union movement during particular historical periods or around specific events (Bois 1947, Guérin 1963, Rabaut 1974, Laguiller 1996, Fichaut 2003, Salles 2005).

Regarding literature on the united front, alongside the substantial body of work written by Trotsky himself,[18] works written by his supporters and designed to stimulate debate within their own organisations or amongst those close to them have regularly appeared since the late 1920s. This is evident in the internal bulletins from the various Trotskyist parties and leaflets destined for distribution to particular workplaces archived at CERMTRI[19] in Paris. Modern examples include LCR (1988) and more recently: Carasso and Viken (2005), Godard (2008), Sabado (2006, 2008) and Jaffard (2008). The starting point for much of their discussion regarding interventions within the trade union and wider workers' movement is the observation of the apparent tendency, as noted above, for workers to co-operate with each other at times of economic or social struggles by creating autonomous, democratic rank-and-file organisations such as factory and workers' councils. This tendency has been noted throughout the history of the workers' movement; indeed Marx highlights it in his writings on

[18] See Appendix 3, Works by Trotsky after 1927 making significant reference to the united front.
[19] Centre d'Etudes et de Recherches sur les Mouvements Trotskyste et Révolutionnaires Internationaux.

the Paris Commune, seeing it as a step towards workers establishing their own state organisation (Marx, 1871). However, very little work has been done by independent writers to analyse precisely how the united front has been implemented by militants in France inside the workplace and how successful or otherwise the use of this tactic has been. A recent exhaustive bibliography[20] prepared for the journal *Dissidences* (2009 [6] 211-119) showed that 92 masters or doctoral theses on the subject of Trotsky and Trotskyism in France had been submitted since 1968. Research topics ranged from the experience of Trotskyists during the 1936 Popular Front (Attis 1982), to the origins of French Trotskyism (Gluckstein 1974), activism in *Lutte ouvrière* (Kuzmanovic 1999) and the electoral success of the Trotskyist movement between 1945 and 2002 (Sonesi 2004). Not one of them carried out specific research on the united front tactic inside the trade unions. This is further confirmed by Ubbiali (2009) in his analysis of academic and university research in France on the subject of Trotskyism. He also remarks (2009, 53) that the former LCR itself has been the focus for the vast majority of academic work in this area. A similar picture emerges from a search of the 15,000 entries in the Leon Trotsky Bibliography (Lubitz 2010) and likewise the theses stored at CERMTRI. This study therefore attempts to address this lacuna.

The remainder of this introductory chapter outlines the structure of the thesis. In Chapter Two, 'The united front tactic: an overview', I explore the theory and development of the united front tactic from early written references in the works of Marx and Engels, through to a working definition in use in the present day. In

[20] See: http://www.dissidences.net/documents/complement_vol6_biblio.pdf [accessed 30 May 2011]

doing so I describe its use by the Bolsheviks and how the establishment of Soviets were seen as the 'the highest form of the united front' (McKerrell 2002, 50). I then examine later developments with reference in particular to the *Theses of the United Front* as adopted and promoted by the Fourth Congress of the Communist International in December 1922. This is accompanied firstly by a brief exploration of the discussions surrounding the concept of the united front within both the French Communist Party and the wider revolutionary left inside the CGT in the period before the Fourth Congress, and secondly by a review of the subsequent debates resulting from its official adoption as a policy by the Comintern.

The next part of the chapter deals with the transformation in official Comintern attitudes to the united front. Initially seen as a genuine alliance of workers' parties, it came to be regarded first as a 'front' imposed from above and controlled by Communist parties, then as a means of bringing together workers, the middle class and even ruling class elements into what by 1936 had become known as Popular Fronts. I outline Trotsky's opposition to this process, making reference to the situation in Germany and to Trotsky's writings at this time on the need for a workers' 'united front against fascism' (Trotsky 1931a). I then draw out key components of this body of work, note the differences between the united front and Popular Front, and identify characteristics of the united front which have been generally understood and accepted by the Trotskyist movement in France (and elsewhere) and applied by them in a variety of subsequent political, social and economic struggles. A definition is offered, but I make the point that

what can usefully be described as the united front may vary quite substantially at times, according to the precise nature of circumstances and situations.

Chapter Three, 'The 1936 Hotchkiss strike: the united front tested in practice', examines the attempts by the Trotskyists in the *Parti ouvrier internationaliste* (POI) to use the united front tactic to build autonomous workers' councils or soviets, as they preferred to call them, in workplaces during the strike wave and factory occupations in June 1936 following the formation of the Popular Front government. I assess the effectiveness of the tactic and the extent to which the POI was able for a short period to establish a 'soviet-style organisation' (Danos and Gibelin 1986, 143) in defiance of both the Communist and Socialist Parties at the Hotchkiss armament factory in Levallois. I use this initiative as a first case study and consider in detail to what extent it can be seen as demonstrating the practical implementation of the united front tactic at a rank-and-file level.

Faced with the possibility of fascists taking power in France, the two major left-wing political parties supported by workers, the PCF and SFIO, had formed an electoral alliance in 1934 and so worked in unity for the first time since 1920. This was followed in March 1936 by the reunification[21] of the two major trade union confederations of the period, the *Confédération générale du travail unitaire* (CGTU) and the CGT, into one organisation, which kept the name CGT. The desire for unity even extended to the far left, providing the impetus for the realignment of the disparate Trotskyist groups into one party, the POI. The attempt at Hotchkiss was led by a POI Central Committee member, Georges

[21] They had originally split in late 1921.

Chéron, who was a long-standing activist in the *Fédération des Métaux* section of the CGT and a former PCF member. It was the only successful attempt of its kind to have been recorded during the events of May and June 1936. I provide some biographical background about Chéron who, as a prominent militant, had earlier transferred his allegiance from Stalin to Trotsky. I give an explanation of how his actions and those of the Hotchkiss workers represented an example of an attempt to present an alternative political leadership and direction for the strikes and occupations to that provided by the PCF. I evaluate the degree of success of the Trotskyists in the practical implementation of the united front tactic**.** The chapter then compares this experience with two other attempts by Trotskyists to build united fronts inside the trade unions. The first attempt, known as the *Opposition unitaire* (OU), took place before 1934 at a time when the PCF, following directions from Moscow, pursued its *classe contre classe*[22] policy:

> La ligne classe contre classe, bientôt inscrite dans le processus de stalinisation, réactive et élargit la bolchevisation. La radicalité du discours, l'évocation de la grève politique et l'attente d'une prochaine crise révolutionnaire, se combinent avec un sectarisme grandissant (Wolikow 2007, 11).

The result of this was that many PCF members in workplaces and trade unions refused to work in alliances with other workers. The second attempt, the *Cercle syndicaliste lutte de classe* was organised in the period when the Popular Front was in decline and this time brought together a wide range of left-wing militants, including some from the PCF, who wished to actively struggle to defend the social reforms gained in 1936.

[22] This policy, also known as the 'Third Period' policy, was adopted in 1928 by the Comintern, which deemed that the time was ripe for working class revolution throughout the world.

Chapter Four, entitled '1944 -1948: The united front at Caudron and Renault', examines the early post-war period and focuses in particular on two further examples where the united front tactic was used by different groups of Trotskyists. The first case study from the Caudron aircraft factory, part of the Renault group at Issy-les-Moulineaux on the south western outskirts of Paris, draws upon the first-hand account by Simonne Minguet of her role as a leader in the factory workers' committee. Minguet, a member of the *Parti communiste internationaliste* (PCI), was one of the few Trotskyists during the immediate post-war period who was able to maintain such a position in a PCF-dominated workplace committee. The PCI was formed in February 1944 when three[23] of the four Trotskysist groups remaining in France agreed to unite together into a single organisation. During the liberation of Paris and especially at the time of the *semaine insurrectionnelle*[24] the PCI encouraged its members to join wherever possible armed factory militia and transform them from the PCF-inspired 'patriotic' militia into workers' militia. Such a practical application of the united front tactic was not without danger, as the Communists considered the Trotskyists to be an enemy on a par with the Nazi occupiers. Simultaneously the PCI endeavoured to create a system of *fronts ouvriers*[25]aimed at bringing 'revolutionary' workers together into groups as a first step towards building workers' committees in workplaces. With the PCF being part of the post-war Provisional Government and promoting the *bataille pour la production,* the formation of workers' councils, albeit without the final intention of bringing about full workers' control of production, thus became for a short time official

[23] The fourth group, *Lutte de Classe,* remained apart from this alliance.
[24] Week beginning Saturday 19 August 1944.
[25] *La Verité*. Special edition, May 1944, p2.

government policy. This meant that there was an opportunity for the Trotskyists to try to build and agitate. It was into one such workers' council in the Caudron factory that Minguet, without in the first instance openly disclosing her Trotskyist membership, began her interventions. She was to remain active, achieving a leadership position in the council until the factory closed in 1948.

Lutte de classe, using their later name *Union communiste* (UC), played the leading role in the second case study in this chapter, the Renault Strike of 1947. This strike was led by Pierre Bois, a fitter in the factory who had been a Trotskyist since 1941. I highlight the issues leading up to the strike, and in particular show how the UC in the face of opposition from both the CGT and PCF was able to gain support from the majority of workers inside the factory. Building this support through the means of the united front tactic, the UC and its supporters were perceived as a threat to the hegemony of the PCF inside Renault, up until then a key bastion of Communist support and influence. I explain how, when faced with this threat from their left, the PCF and CGT were obliged to take a more militant position and in doing so weakened the UC-built united front in order to take control of the strike movement. This left turn ultimately led to Communist ministers being removed from government. In the aftermath of the strike the CGT and PCF began to play a more resolutely oppositional role and successfully regained support from workers in Renault. I explain how the UC responded to this by attempting to build a new united front organisation, the *Syndicat démocratique Renault* (SDR). But without the support of sufficient numbers of rank-and-file PCF members this attempt was short lived, its failure leading to the eventual demise of the UC inside Renault. I note how the renewed

industrial militancy of the PCF and CGT, when faced with government austerity measures, and influenced by vociferous anti-Americanism, was to lead to a new split in the CGT and the formation in April 1948 of the CGT-FO union confederation.

Before outlining Chapter Five, 'Coordinations: a modern form of United Front', which looks at examples of the implementation of the united front from the mid-1980s onwards, it is important to note why I do not present any examples from the intervening period. The twenty years after 1948 represented a time when Trotskyist influence was at its nadir and for this reason their ability to intervene in the workplace and influence fellow trade union members was to all intents and purposes non-existent. At the end of the 1940s it had become evident that capitalism was not going to be plunged into crisis and uncertainty as had been expected by the majority of the Trotskyist movement and indeed France was entering into a phase of relative prosperity and economic expansion later described as the *trente glorieuses* (Fourastié 1979). Trade union membership and support for the PCF was, in contrast to that of the Trotskyists, at a high point and the party was able to re-establish near hegemonic control over much of the trade union movement. Trotskyists in the PCI found themselves very much on the margins of both political and trade union activity. It was impossible for them to openly organise inside the CGT although later they did have some limited success in the other two confederations and in particular *Force ouvrière* (FO). This 'pénible traversée du desert' (Bensaïd 2002, 87), was to last until after the general strike of May 1968. Added to their difficulties was the fact that during the early 1950s, at both national and international levels, they were riven by

internal discord. Two ultimately unsuccessful attempts were made at organisational restructuring by some militants from the Trotskyist tradition, the *Rassemblement démocratique révolutionnaire* (RDR)[26] and the *Socialisme ou Barbarie* group (SoB).[27] The remaining members of the PCI[28] eventually split apart in 1952 as a result of disagreements over a fundamental change in tactics agreed to by the third world congress of the Fourth International. The united front in its previous incarnation was abandoned in favour of the tactic known as *entrism sui generis*. Through this tactic Trotskyists would sacrifice their own independent party work and become members of socialist or communist parties and associated trade unions. In practice this meant that in order to fully integrate themselves the majority of Trotskyists in France had to join the PCF and become active in the CGT, submitting to the leaderships and discipline of those organisations. Although this was envisaged as a short-term tactic, in some cases Trotskyists remained hidden inside host organisations for several years. André Fichaut (2003) for example, a Trotskyist since 1949 and a well respected trade union militant in the shipyards of Brest and Saint-Nazaire, describes how he joined the PCF in 1956, keeping his membership of the PCI a secret until 1968. Others such as Pierre Lambert, who had opposed the decision to enter the PCF and CGT and who was to eventually lead the *Organisation communiste internationale* (OCI), proposed instead a policy of infiltrating the non-PCF-dominated trade unions and in particular the FO, agitating as a semi-clandestine Trotskyist 'group' within the unions.

[26] See Birchall 1999.
[27] See Feixa 2006, Gottraux 1997 and Linden 1997.
[28] Estimated to be only 150 in 1952 (Alexander 1991, 383).

Chapter Five begins with an examination of more recent expressions of the united front tactic in the form of *coordinations.* Making reference in particular to work by Denis (1996) and contemporary newspaper reports, I outline how Trotskyists became involved in and used these rank-and-file alliances of workers during periods of industrial or social unrest in the years between 1986 and 1995. I explore how, during the first phase of this period, the use of *coordinations* reflected a desire by rank-and-file workers for unity in struggle and as such became a strategic and tactical response to the disunity shown by the official trade union movement. By the time of the events and strike wave of December 1995 this search for unity had led to the creation of the SUD unions founded explicitly on the principles of solidarity, unity, and democracy – a reaffirmation of the principle that 'the trade union is the rudimentary form of the united front' (Trotsky 1932b). I examine the creation of two of these autonomous unions in the *Solidaires* movement, SUD-PTT and SUD-Santé, by making reference to relevant primary sources and interviews with participants.

The final chapter, by way of conclusion, firstly recapitulates the main elements of each of the preceding chapters, examining the different methods of application of the united front tactic used in each case study followed by an evaluation of their efficiency or otherwise. In doing so, I consider whether the case studies reveal any common features in the use of the united front tactic, whether the use of the tactic enabled Trotskyists to make effective interventions in trade unions and so contributing to the winning of industrial disputes. In addition, I consider whether Trotskyist trade union activists were able to successfully attract other workers to their revolutionary ideas. Finally, in making an assessment of the

success or otherwise of the united front tactic, I consider whether its use can continue to have a relevance for the Trotskyist movement in the contemporary period. Is the creation of united fronts a realistic, relevant and practical tactic and one which enables militants to further their industrial and political goals?

Chapter Two

The united front tactic: an overview

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the struggles to organise workers into the sort of alliances we would now call trade unions, all had at their heart the principle of unity. The political expression of this principle was often reflected in the growth of socialist and communist ideas and the development of organisations and parties which could work to put these ideas into practice. These organisations included within them people who were influenced by the ideas of Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, some of whom considered themselves to be revolutionary Communists. From the outset Marx and Engels saw the need for workers to unite if they were to be successful in achieving their own 'emancipation.' Indeed in the second chapter of the Communist Manifesto (1848) they write:

> In what relation do the Communists stand to the proletarians as a whole? The Communists do not form a separate party opposed to the other working-class parties. They have no interests separate and apart from those of the proletariat as a whole. They do not set up any sectarian principles of their own, by which to shape and mould the proletarian movement.
>
> The Communists are distinguished from the other working-class parties by this only:
>
> 1. In the national struggles of the proletarians of the different countries, they point out and bring to the front the common interests of the entire proletariat, independently of all nationality.
>
> 2. In the various stages of development which the struggle of the working class against the bourgeoisie has to pass through, they always and everywhere represent the interests of the movement as a whole. (Marx and Engels 1969, 61).

The question of how to create effective working relationships between the different components of the working class – between those who consider that socialism and then communism can only be brought to fruition through revolutionary means on the one hand and those who consider that these aims can be achieved by negotiation and parliamentary reforms on the other – has been and continues to be an area for discussion whenever economic or political struggles arise. At grass-roots level, workers with differing political persuasions have often joined together on an unofficial or purely pragmatic basis to advocate certain positions and to try and win disputes which may have limited scope, but which nevertheless involve common, immediate demands and interests. As McKerrell notes:

> As a Marxist once you are involved in any broad political activity like a strike, community campaign or demonstration, you will by necessity be working with others who are not of the same viewpoint as you. If you did not work together on this basis then no successes would be possible. That is common sense for anyone that has been involved in a struggle (McKerrell 2002, 49).

The concept used to describe this tactic of working class unity in struggle has become known as that of the united front.

This chapter will examine the development of the tactic in the early twentieth century particularly with reference to the *Theses on the United Front* (Communist International 1922b) initially discussed at the Third Congress of the Communist International (Comintern) in 1921 and formally adopted as an appendix to the *Theses on Comintern Tactics* (Communist International 1922a) at

the Fourth Congress in November the following year. The practical interpretation of the *Theses* changed significantly over the next period as the revolutionary upsurge, which had swept Europe following the end of the First World War, declined. Further modifications were made as Stalin and his supporters gradually gained control of the Bolshevik (Communist) Party and then of the Comintern. It was left to the marginalised and exiled Trotsky to argue for and further develop the use of the united front tactic, in particular in the fight against the rise of Fascism. The distinction between his interpretation of the united front and that later advocated by the Communist Parties will be examined.

The chapter will make reference to examples of how Trotskyist militants have since attempted to apply the united front in a variety of forms and how the precise nature of these are dependent upon prevailing political and social situations in the workplace, trade unions or wider political arena.

The emergence of the united front tactic

In its most basic form, the united front can be understood as an alliance on the political left between revolutionary and reformist workers[29]. Often, though not always, the alliance is established on the instigation of revolutionaries in order to bring workers together in a common struggle, whether this is a localised trade union demand or a much wider political issue. In most cases such struggles will be initially defensive in order to maintain previously-won rights, be they in regard to working conditions, pay or political freedoms. But such defensive

[29] Using the definitions discussed in Chapter One.

struggles can lead to new circumstances in which the struggle, transformed, comes to question the validity of the capitalist system itself:

> Clashes with industrialists, with the bourgeoisie, with the state power, on the initiative of one side or the other, run their due course. In these clashes – insofar as they involve the vital interests of the entire working class, or its majority, or this or that section – the working masses sense the need of unity in action, of unity in resisting the onslaught of capitalism or unity in taking the offensive against it (Trotsky 1922).

By the time of the 1905 Revolution in Russia, this instinctive aspiration to unite with others was being intentionally used for the first time by Lenin and revolutionary socialists supportive of his ideas, as an organisational tactic and as part of a wider political strategy. Marxists in the Russian Social Democratic Party[30] actively debated whether or not to work with non-socialist parties in order to build the revolutionary movement. For the first time in history the use of mass strikes by workers were central to this movement, as was the creation of a workers' council or 'soviet' in the form of the Petersburg Soviet of Workers' Deputies, arguably becoming the most democratic institution in Russian history up to that time.

How they would respond to these movements was at the crux of the debate amongst the Social Democrats. At the beginning of the events of that year, the party was supported by only a small number of workers and the urban working class itself formed only a minority of the Russian population. The use of what was effectively a united front, though it included non-working class elements,

[30] Until 1917 the term 'social democratic' was used by both the revolutionary and reformist wings of the socialist movement which had developed in some advanced capitalist countries during the second half of the 19th century.

was seen as essential by Lenin, leader of what became known as the Bolshevik faction of the party, if the Social Democrats were to have some influence in the movement and eventually to perhaps lead it. Debating the role that they could play in an imagined Provisional Revolutionary Government, Lenin wrote in April 1905:

> The Social-Democrats must not fear to take bold strides forward, to deal joint "blows" at the enemy, shoulder to shoulder with the revolutionary bourgeois democrats, on the definite understanding, however, that the organisations are not to be merged, that we march separately but strike together, that we do not conceal the diversity of interests, that we watch our ally as we would our enemy.

Furthermore, he adds that for a government of working-class democracy to be durable it needs the support of the vast majority of people:

> The Russian proletariat, however, is at present a minority of the population in Russia. It can become the great, overwhelming majority only if it combines with the mass of semi-proletarians, semi-proprietors, i.e. with the mass of the petty-bourgeois urban and rural poor. Such a composition of the social basis of the possible and desirable revolutionary-democratic dictatorship will, of course, affect the composition of the revolutionary government and inevitably lead to the participation, or even predominance, within it of the most heterogeneous representatives of revolutionary democracy (Lenin 1905c).

Lenin urged all members of the Social Democrats to join trade unions, though some sections of the Bolshevik faction of the party opposed him and did not support his position regarding the importance of the growing trade union movement. They saw the trade unions as being only concerned with narrow, short-term economic issues when, according to them, what was required was an

armed uprising and the immediate overthrow of the 'Tsarist autocracy'. Concentration on purely trade-union or economic issues would, they asserted, divert workers from their most important demand, namely that of winning a 'democratic republic'. Lenin disagreed with this analysis, considering it to be an example of 'ultra-left' sectarianism. In a letter written to S.I. Gusev,[31] he wrote:

> We must not stand aloof, and above all not give any occasion for thinking that we ought to stand aloof, but endeavour to take part, to influence, etc …. It is important that at the very outset Russian Social Democrats should strike the right note in regard to the trade unions, and at once create a tradition of Social Democratic participation, of Social Democratic leadership (Lenin 1905a).

His analysis of the strike movement, written five years later in *Strike Statistics in Russia,* confirms this view, asserting that 'interdependence between the economic and political strikes is quite obvious: no really broad mass movement is possible without a close connection between the two' (Lenin 1910a). What can begin as a mass strike around purely economic issues can be transformed into a political strike changing workers' ideas and ultimately challenging state power.

Similarly, some Bolsheviks wanted to boycott the Petersburg Soviet, created on the initiative of the Mensheviks following the general strike in October1905. They were only willing to work within it if it fully accepted the Social Democratic programme and recognised their leadership of the Soviet. In effect, they were arguing that workers had no need of the Soviet because it was a

[31] Bolshevik and later Red Army commander and supporter of Stalin.

'politically amorphous and socialistically immature workers' organisation,'[32] especially since they already had the Social Democratic Party. Once again Lenin disagrees, saying that a broad movement is needed to carry on the political and the economic struggle through both the Soviet and the party. In a letter intended for the Bolshevik newspaper *Novaya Zhizn*, but rejected by the editor, he writes: 'It seems to me that to lead the political struggle, both the Soviet … and the party are, to an equal degree, absolutely necessary.' He then continues:

> We are not afraid of so broad and mixed a composition – indeed, we want it, for unless the proletariat and the peasantry unite and unless the Social Democrats and revolutionary democrats form a fighting alliance, the great Russian revolution cannot be fully successful (Lenin 1905b).

In an analysis written the following year, he puts forward the idea that while soviets are organs of direct mass struggle originating from mass strikes in potentially revolutionary situations, they are not necessarily led by revolutionaries and are in and of themselves insufficient to organise a revolutionary uprising. For that, the revolutionary socialist party is required. Nevertheless the Soviet can be seen as the form of the revolutionary government of the future, 'a workers' government in embryo' (Trotsky 1972, 266), which allows the revolutionary party to democratically present and attempt to win the widest possible numbers of workers to its position. In Lenin's view: 'They are necessary for welding the masses together, for creating unity in struggle' (cited in Cliff 1975, 166). Indeed, as Trotsky later wrote in his history of the 1905 Revolution: 'In order to have authority in the eyes of the masses on the very day

[32] Extract from a 'Letter to all Party organisations' on 27 October 1905 from the Central Committee of the Bolsheviks. (Cited in Cliff 1975, 162).

it [the Soviet] came into being, such an organisation had to be based on the broadest representation' (Trotsky 1972, 123). Furthermore, echoing Lenin, he maintained that its principal task was 'to give unity to the revolutionary struggle of the proletariat' (Trotsky 1972, 274).

The term united front was not used to describe such unity in action and struggle as a formalised tactic by either Lenin or Trotsky in 1905, even though, throughout this period, they both emphasised the absolute necessity for unity between the different components of the workers' movement. Indeed, it is argued by some writers that the experiences of 1905 provide little, if any, insights into the united front tactic of bringing together revolutionaries and reformists (Thomas 2005). The Tsarist autocracy, ruling over what in effect was still a semi-feudal country, was unwilling to permit any reforms to itself whatsoever, thus forcing all the different sections of Russian society engaged in challenging the regime to adopt what could be considered revolutionary positions. Some limited themselves to demands modeled upon those of the 1789 French (or bourgeois) revolution, such as freedom of speech, or establishing parliamentary democracy. Others wanted to go further and move towards a socialist revolution based on the example of the 1871 Paris Commune and what they regarded as the establishment of proletarian democracy. Nonetheless, they were all revolutionary challenges to the existing regime.

<u>The united front tactic is formalised</u>

It took another seventeen years for the concept of the united front to be formalised, when in 1922 the Comintern adopted the *Theses of the United Front.*

This followed its successful use by the Bolsheviks leading up to, and during the October revolution of 1917. The earlier revolution in February 1917, which brought down tsarism, saw the establishment of the Petrograd Soviet of Workers' Deputies. This workers' council comprised of worker delegates and also importantly, of delegates from army regiments, was modelled on that created in 1905. It was emulated in cities and towns throughout the country. Even though its purpose was to support and represent the interests of workers and peasants, and was, according to the journalist and children's novelist Arthur Ransome[33], 'the true expression of the people's will' (1992, 35), one of its first actions was to defend the establishment of the Provisional Government. This was made up of mainly bourgeois politicians representing landowners and rich industrialists, many of whom had served in the former tsarist state Duma. The two bodies were soon vying for supremacy and control, creating an unstable situation: '[t]he struggle in Russia became, as the Bolsheviks wished it should become, a struggle between the classes, a struggle in which the issue became ever clearer between the working and the privileged classes' (Ransome 1992, 37). The Bolsheviks, one of only two avowedly Marxist parties in the Soviet, the other being the Mensheviks, were initially in a minority and were to remain so for several months. Nevertheless, they prioritised agitation and debate within the soviets, at the same time that they fully supported workers in their struggles to defend wages and conditions and backing the seizures of land by peasants. Even so, at the first all-Russian Congress of Soviets they only had the support of 13 per cent of the delegates (Haynes 1997, 48). When, from April onwards, they argued that the Soviet should take power, they were repeatedly opposed by the Mensheviks

[33] Ransome worked in Russia between 1914 and 1920.

and the most influential of the other parties in the early Soviet, the Social Revolutionaries. Nonetheless, they continued to work on a united front basis, with other workers' parties in the Soviet in opposing the Provisional Government. After intense debate within the Bolshevik Party, Lenin achieved support for his ideas. He called upon the membership to 'patiently explain' (Lenin 1917b) to workers and delegates why taking power was the only way in which the gains of the February Revolution could be secured, and the interests of workers assured. A second revolution took place, the Provisional Government was overthrown on the 25 October and Soviet power established. Trotsky was later to describe the Soviets as being 'the highest form of the united front' (McKerrell 2002, 50).

The Comintern, in this early period after the October revolution, was seen as a body through which revolutionary parties could build, organise and co-ordinate socialist revolution on an international basis. However, with capitalism reasserting itself and revolution in the immediate term no longer on the agenda, the groups belonging to the Comintern focused their deliberation on two areas of concern. Firstly, around what strategies and tactics needed to be employed to defend the gains already achieved by workers, and secondly, to build their parties in preparation for what they saw as the next period of revolutionary struggles. The majority of workers however did not hold revolutionary ideas and were still predominantly influenced by reformism. They accepted that solutions to their problems could be achieved by making reforms of one sort or another within the existing parameters of capitalism. It was to these workers, and with the new political circumstances in mind, that the Communists addressed themselves when

developing and formalising the theory of the united front. One major problem however was that members of the Comintern itself held a wide variety of views on the issue, ranging from those who discounted the idea of working with anyone who did not fully share their ideas, to those who were prepared to dissolve the Communist parties inside the reformist parties. It must be said that during this period, differences of opinion and debate were key characteristics of the organisation. It was only in the second half of the 1920s that effective dissent was stifled, as the Comintern increasingly became the mouthpiece for Soviet foreign policy. One group, considered to be the ultra left, consisted of those within the *Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands*[34] (KPD) who developed a 'theory of the offensive' (Harman 1982, 209-211) and led a failed armed insurrection in central Germany during March 1921. In doing so they were effectively trying to replace a mass workers' movement with a relatively small number of their own militants. The result was defeat, increased police repression and KPD membership dropping by a half. A further example of such sectarianism took place when the Italian Communist Party refused calls from other workers' parties for united action to oppose the fascists when they began to attack the workers' movement in 1921-1922, an endeavour which arguably resulted in the inability of the party to reassert itself openly for another two decades.

At the opposite end of the spectrum were those members of the former Second Communist International who, despite affiliating to the new Third International and thus giving the impression of supporting the Bolshevik Revolution, were still

[34] Communist Party

heavily influenced by reformist social democracy and thus unlikely to support any insurrectionary revolutionary developments. Many of these were mass working class parties such as the Norwegian Labour Party (NAP). This party dominated the left in its country. The NAP leadership had been forced to negotiate admission to the new International due to pressure from rank-and-file members, during the period of rising revolutionary fervour in 1919. By 1923 when this mood had dissipated, the leadership withdrew the party from the Comintern.

A vigorous debate ensued during the Third Comintern Congress over the question of the united front. In particular, the Bolshevik leaders highlighted the danger of Communist Parties becoming nothing more than sects if they did not seriously engage with the idea of working with reformists. The resulting statement outlined that the task of the Communist International:

> is not to establish small communist sects aiming to influence the working masses purely through agitation and propaganda, but to participate directly in the struggle of the working masses, establish Communist leadership of the struggle, and in the course of the struggle create large, revolutionary, mass Communist Parties, and win leadership of the struggle (Communist International 1921).

Lenin and Trotsky argued that if revolutionaries were to be successful in building Communist Parties into mass workers' organisations, then the immediate goal was to find ways of working with the majority of workers. This entailed supporting 'partial demands' around wages, unemployment, working hours and so on, and in the process taking revolutionary ideas to them. It was evident, they maintained, that this could not be done by ignoring those workers who were not

yet revolutionaries, or by denouncing their leaders as ‘traitors.’ Nor could it be done by hiding or diluting revolutionary ideas inside reformist or ‘centrist’ parties. Trotsky admitted that if it had been possible to attract the majority of workers to the revolutionary party without having recourse to unity with reformists it would be: ‘the best thing in the world. But then the very question of the united front would not exist in its present form' (Trotsky 1922).

However, such a possibility was not envisaged. In the real world where workers’ ideas developed and changed at different rates, dependent upon circumstances, there was no other alternative. The experience of the Russian Revolution, where the Bolsheviks had been prepared to work with any workers regardless of their political views, was seen as the example to follow. Indeed, Trotsky recounts how during the Kornilov coup against the Provisional Government in August 1917, even though he had been imprisoned by Kerensky, leader of the Provisional Government, the Bolsheviks nevertheless agreed to form an alliance with him in order to defeat Kornilov and defend the revolution. Upon his release from prison Trotsky went straight to a meeting of this united front.

After much discussion the Fourth Congress of the Comintern eventually reached an agreement on the theory and practice of the united front tactic as part of a revolutionary strategy:

> The united front tactic is simply an initiative whereby the Communists propose to join with all workers belonging to other parties and groups and all unaligned workers in a common struggle to defend the immediate, basic interests of the working class against the bourgeoisie. Every action, for even the most trivial everyday demand, can lead to

> revolutionary awareness and revolutionary education; it is the experience of struggle that will convince workers of the inevitability of revolution and the historic importance of Communism (Communist International 1922b).

As a result, it was expected that revolutionaries[35] would agitate within united fronts over all immediate or partial economic or political demands made by workers. They would establish a presence in whatever associations[36] were created by movements of rank-and-file workers in order to achieve these demands. The aim would be to bring all workers together in joint struggle, whether they be revolutionaries, anarchists, reformist or non-aligned. Simultaneously, when struggles arose, Communists would be expected, within certain limits and on specific issues, to engage in talks and create alliances with leaders of reformist or non-Communist parties. Such non-Communist leaders, representing as they did sections of the working class, would thus be put in the situation of having to lead workers' struggles. If they did not do so or were too ready to make concessions, then this lack of militancy could be exposed, allowing Communists to demonstrate that they were the most determined activists and defenders of workers' rights. It therefore became possible for Communists, according to the *Theses on the United Front*, to increase the influence of Marxist views amongst workers, thus creating the possibility that they would break with reformism and move towards revolutionary ideas. United fronts are thus deemed to be the perfect arenas for ideological and political debate:

[35] Members of the Communist Parties.
[36] Such as factory councils, action or strike committees.

> The united front thus had two aspects: (1) it united revolutionaries and reformists in a common struggle around issues of concern to the working class as a whole; and (2) it involved a struggle for political influence over the masses between revolutionaries and reformists (Callinicos 2002, 15).

The Theses on Comintern Tactics went on to describe scenarios which could lead to the creation of a variety of possible 'workers' governments'. Furthermore, it outlined the position revolutionaries needed to take with regards to calls for the establishment of and participation in such governments. 'The workers' government slogan follows inevitably from the entire united front tactic' (Communist International, 1922a). How the united front tactic could be most aptly applied in these circumstances was described with reference to the existing political situation in a number of different countries where Communists had at that time established a presence. However, the underlying theme throughout was the necessity and preparedness of Communists to create 'coalitions of all workers' parties around economic and political issues, which will fight and finally overthrow bourgeois power' (Communist International, 1922a). Referring to developments particularly in Italy, the threat posed by the rise of fascism was also highlighted:

> One of the most important tasks of the Communist Parties is to organise resistance to international fascism. They must be at the head of the working class in the fight against the fascist gangs, must be extremely active in setting up united fronts on the question (Communist International, 1922a).

The acceptance of Comintern decisions by the different Communist Parties was not straightforward however. In Germany, for example, the united front theses

were subject to continued criticism within the KPD, although their eventual application enabled it to see its membership start to increase again after the debacle of the 'March action' in the previous year. By the end of 1922 membership had climbed to 222,000, making it the largest Communist Party in the West. Moreover, it was also able to influence significant numbers of non-aligned workers on its periphery (Harman 1982, 239). With over 12,000 local councillors it controlled 80 municipalities and was the majority party in a further 70. The united front tactic enabled the KPD to have a strong presence in the trade union movement and even allowed it to take the leadership of some of them.[37]

The united front and the 'French question'

The situation in France was altogether more complex. From the very start of discussions about the united front in 1921 the PCF had taken an independent stance. Significant members of its leadership disagreed with the Comintern position over this and a whole series of other issues. The PCF at this time was dominated by a leadership still heavily influenced by reformism and was to remain so until the left of the party, linked to the *Vie ouvrière* group, which included Pierre Monatte and Alfred Rosmer, gained control in the first months of 1923. This was in spite of the fact that at the 1920 Congress of Tours, which saw the foundation of the PCF, the 'reformists' had eagerly agreed to accept the twenty one conditions[38] of adherence to the new Third International. The first of these stated that: '[a]ll propaganda and agitation must bear a really communist character and correspond to the programme and decisions of the Communist International.'

[37] For example, the Berlin and Leipzig railway workers' unions.
[38] See Appendix 4. Theses on the conditions of admission to the Communist International.

This did not, however, stop the leadership from disagreeing with that of the Comintern. The debate over the united front tactic at the Marseilles Congress of the party in December 1921 was a case in point and resulted in the successful adoption of a motion which affirmed that:

> il n'existe pour les communistes de ce pays aucune possibilité de rapprochement avec des chefs dissidents[39], alliés de la bourgeoisie et du gouvernement ou avec les dirigeants syndicalistes qui ont abandonné la lutte de classe (*L'Humanité,* 31 December 1921).

Less than a month later, the new Central Committee of the party reaffirmed this decision by unanimously agreeing a motion which:

> not only reiterated the impossibility of any alliance between the PCF and its reformist foes in the SFIO and CGT, but affirmed that the *Comité Directeur* (Central Committee) considered this tactic to pose certain dangers for the International, 'against which guarantees will have to be secured' (Wohl 1966, 261).

Furthermore the Central Committee instructed its delegates to the Comintern to defend this position at the forthcoming meeting of the Enlarged Executive of the Communist International (ECCI) at the end of February 1922. The delegates Cachin, Sellier, Renoult and Métayer put forward their objections to the united front and in doing so managed to gain the support of six other delegates from the Italian and Spanish parties. Nevertheless, the ECCI voted by a majority of 46 to approve the continued application of the policy.

[39] That is to say, with the Socialist party.

Throughout the rest of the year the 'French question' was never far from the agenda of the ECCI. They appointed Trotsky as chair of their French Commission, charging him with the task of overcoming the French opposition to the agreed Comintern policies, in particular, that of the united front. The Executive had three main concerns with the PCF. Firstly, it wanted to model it more along the lines of the Bolsheviks by ridding it of the reformist or 'centrist' elements. Indeed Lenin, frustrated with the direction the PCF was taking, is quoted as saying to Trotsky: 'Why can't we ask the French communists to kick out those rotten parliamentarians Cachin and Frossard?' (Paizis 2007, 211).

Secondly, the Comintern wanted to resolve the question of the united front tactic in France and by doing so address the third issue, that of the necessity of coordinated Communist interventions inside the trade unions. These concerns were made all the more urgent by the fact that the party's influence was declining; indeed its membership had fallen by half since the Tours Congress (Paizis 2007, 214). The Comintern's criticisms of the French Communists and their trade union work focused on the fact that they tended to concentrate on 'political' matters at the expense of concerted work inside the unions around the everyday 'economic' concerns of the mass of workers. This led to a situation where 'little work was done to mobilise the masses in regular activity nor was any systematic work undertaken in the unions to defend the workers against the new offences that the employers were launching' (Paizis 2007, 212). The leadership of the CGT trade union confederation at this time was made up for the most part of reformists, who had to all intents and purposes renounced their former doctrine of revolutionary syndicalism and had virtually abandoned any

attempt to combat the deterioration of workers' wages and conditions through the mass mobilisation of its members. Instead, they preferred to engage in lobbying of parliament and conciliatory negotiations with the employers. In opposition to the reformist CGT leadership, the revolutionary left was grouped around the *Comités syndicalistes révolutionnaires* (CSR). The CSR had been established on the initiative of the teachers' journal *École Emancipée* as a means whereby rank-and-file union activists could coordinate militant policies and actions through a network of groups in different industrial sectors.

> In October [1919] a committee of 26 minority unions[40] was formed; Monatte, Tommasi, Péricat, and Monmousseau were its leaders. This provisional committee later became the CSR, which acted as a nucleus in the CGT around which revolutionaries could gather and coordinate their plans (Wohl 1966, 140).

Supporters of the CSR included anarchists, revolutionary syndicalists, other advocates of the Bolshevik revolution, and after its founding, members of the PCF. One of the CSR instigators, school teacher Louis Bouët, wrote in his posthumously published memoirs that : '[l]es CSR étaient des organismes constitués au sein des syndicats d'union départementale et fédérale en vue de la propagande nécessaire pour ramener le mouvement syndical à la lutte de classes et à l'internationalisme prolétarien' (Bouët 1973, 289).

Working together, they effectively created a rank-and-file united front of revolutionaries in opposition to the Jouhaux leadership of the CGT. Their influence grew to such an extent during the first half of 1921 that at the Lille congress of the CGT in July, Jouhaux appeared to see them as a threat to his

[40] Unions who held a minority position at the CGT Congress of Lyons in September 1919.

authority. Indeed, the revolutionaries controlled a significant number of unions, including that of the railway workers. In the face of concerted opposition from the leadership of the CGT, the former revolutionary syndicalists, such as Monatte, attempted to reassert the revolutionary traditions of the Confederation. 'Nous maintiendrions nos C.S.R. Ils sont pour nous le groupement des minorités clairvoyantes et agissantes d'hier ; la force qui pourra électriser nos syndicats, empêcher qu'ils ne s'assoupissent' (Monatte 1921a).

After much heated debate a motion on union discipline was narrowly won by Jouhaux and his supporters. As a consequence, in the following months activists and union branches linked to the CSR were excluded or suspended from the union confederation. The left challenged the exclusions and called for an extraordinary congress to discuss the issue, but this was refused by the CGT leadership. Sections of the CSR, including members of the newly-formed Communist Party, therefore began to raise the possibility of splitting the CGT and creating a new union confederation with a revolutionary perspective. Trotsky entered the debate, arguing that Communists should resist calls for a new breakaway union because working class unity was essential in order to effectively counter the employers' offensive. Furthermore, he asserted that the separation was in fact being engineered by the reformists in the CGT as a way of ridding themselves of the growing support for the left: '[l]ike the reformists of the Socialist Party, the reformists of the trade-union movement took the initiative for the split' (Trotsky 1922).

Even at this stage, with the two sides increasingly unwilling or unable to work with each other and a split in the Confederation looking increasingly likely,

Trotsky argued that it was all the more essential for Communists to propose whenever possible united campaigns and coordinated actions with the reformists: 'more consistently, more persistently and resolutely than ever before' (Trotsky 1922). By doing so it would then enable Communists to be in a position to expose more clearly 'each hesitating and evasive step of the reformists' (Trotsky 1922).

The problem for Trotsky was that the PCF seemed incapable of meeting such demands. In his view, it maintained an artificial separation between the economic and the political and continued to do so even after the break up of the CGT and the foundation in January 1922 of the *Confédération générale du travail unitaire* (CGTU), established by those from the far left.[41] Many members of the new union confederation were openly sympathetic to revolutionary ideas, indeed they looked to the PCF for a political lead. At times this lead did not appear to be forthcoming. When 40,000 metalworkers and shipworkers came out on strike in Le Havre in July and August 1922, the PCF officially took no independent initiatives to lead the movement. After three non-PCF trade unionists were shot by the police during the strike, the CGTU called for a general strike on 29 August. Even then *L'Humanité* did not report the strike-call the next day when demand for united action would have been most needed. The shooting of trade unionists, regardless of their political affiliation, by the state authorities can be considered to be a political act. The lack of an immediate political response by the PCF linking the deaths to the economic demands of the strikers was seen to be a derogation of leadership. As a result, Trotsky considered the party to still be the same 'unwieldy and hybrid political formation … an unstable compound of

[41] For the most part from the PCF, revolutionary syndicalists and anarchists.

conflicting elements' (Wohl 1966, 438) that it had been since its inception. Indeed, while some of these elements refused to entertain the idea of united action with other workers' parties inside the unions, they nevertheless supported the idea of forming a government in alliance with the bourgeois Radical Party known as the *Bloc des gauches.* Such an alliance was unacceptable to Trotsky, who instead counterposed 'a bloc of all workers against the bourgeoisie' (Trotsky 1922a).

In continuing his attempt to convince the French Communists to fully adopt the Comintern's policies, Trotsky produced a series of writings, which, drawing upon the practical experiences of the Bolsheviks, set down in some detail the theoretical components of the united front. One of these documents, *On the United Front* (1922), was specifically designed to address the issues surrounding the debates amongst the French Communists. But the first part of the document provides a useful reiteration of the basic principles of the united front tactic. In this, Trotsky argues that while Communists should fight 'for influence over the majority of the working class' and take the lead in all political and economic struggles, the party should not counterpose or substitute itself for the working class. In attempting to secure 'a united front in the struggle against capitalism' the Communist Party should maintain its own independence of organisation and action. However, in the pursuit of the struggle to win 'every movement, however partial, of the toilers against the exploiters and against the bourgeois state', it should still be prepared to unite with those from other workers' parties and even propose joint action with the leaders of these parties. Through initiating united mass actions, he maintains it would therefore be possible to bring more workers

into militant activity and by doing so, compel the reformists, 'against the innermost desires of their own leaders, to support the partial movements' and thus highlight their hesitations, susceptibility to compromise, failings and contradictory positions.

> It is precisely in the course of struggle that broad masses must learn from experience that we fight better than the others, that we see more clearly than the others, that we are more audacious and resolute (Trotsky 1922).

By demonstrating their ability to be the most determined and well organised leaders of united mass action, Communists anticipated that they could convince members of other workers' parties of the need to join them and build a mass revolutionary party which had the aim of overthrowing capitalism:

> The Communists would thus be seen to be doing everything possible to facilitate unity in action; this would be an education for the workers and, by dragging the reformists into action against their will, would sharpen the struggle with them. There was no question of the party losing its identity or accepting any limitation on its freedom of criticism and agitation (Kemp 1984, 53).

At the time of writing *On the United Front,* Trotsky claimed that the PCF, with a membership of 130,000, was large enough and strong enough to secure the 'unchallenged leadership of the French proletariat'. This potential could only be achieved by being prepared to create 'unity in action' with non-Communist workers and trade unionists. Despite the division of the trade union movement into the revolutionary CGTU and the reformist CGT, and while remaining acutely aware that 'trade unions embrace workers of different political shadings

as well as non-party men, atheists as well as believers,' Communists still gave priority to working for unity amongst trade unionists and thus trying to 'reduce to a minimum those obstacles which are placed before the workers' movement by an organisational split.' The drive for united action, however, did not mean the Communist Party should renounce its own ideological positions and principles or subsume itself into an amorphous organisation with the reformists.

> The party can gain influence in the life of the trade unions only to the extent that its members work in the trade unions and carry out the party point of view there. The influence of party members in the trade unions naturally depends on their numerical strength and especially on the degree to which they are able to apply party principles correctly, consistently and expediently to the needs of the trade-union movement (Trotsky 1922).

These components of united front theory were to become a constant element of Trotsky's writings on the issue over the following years.

At the Fourth Congress of the Communist International in November 1922 the situation in the PCF was high on the agenda and formed an important part of the proceedings. Naturally, the twenty-four French delegates focussed their interventions on the Commission set up to debate the 'French question'. The Commission was presided over by Trotsky and included Zinoviev, Bodiga, Zetkin and Lenin. The French delegation used proceedings to further their own factional disputes, much to the annoyance of the Commission. From the outset, the Commission wanted to obtain a definitive resolution to the crisis within the PCF, albeit by favouring the Left faction, whom they saw as being the only genuine Communists. At the end of the Congress, the Commission successfully

proposed a programme intended to enable the PCF, without provoking a split, to restructure itself and to come into line with Comintern policies. The proposals were intended to neutralise the influence of the more conservative and reformist elements on the right, and simultaneously encourage the revolutionary syndicalists on the ultra left, to accept the need for greater party discipline. By January 1923 this had been achieved, the Left faction gained control and ensured from then on that Comintern policies were adopted unequivocally by the French Communists.

The Left Opposition

For Trotsky, early 1923 was effectively his last period as 'second in command' of the Bolsheviks and as heir apparent to Lenin. His rivals, particularly the *troika* formed by Stalin, Zinoviev and Kamenev began to organise in order to oppose any moves which could have given Trotsky the leadership. Having been elected to the post of General Secretary at the 12th Congress of the Bolsheviks in April, Stalin strengthened his position and used the defeat of the German revolutionary movement in October to further his concept of 'Socialism in one Country.' This was an ideological counter to Trotsky's insistence that the revolution could only survive if it was supported by a victorious international revolutionary movement. With the defeat of the German Communists Trotsky's hopes for the successful internationalisation of the Bolshevik revolution were finally dashed. An integral component of the theory of Permanent Revolution, Internationalism was a key element of Trotskyist thought, along with an emphasis on organisation from below, self activity of workers and the implementation of the united front tactic. Stalin continued his climb to power after the death of Lenin in January 1924. He

was able to further eliminate any threat from 'Trotskyism' and what became known as the Left Opposition; destined to become an increasingly persecuted and marginalised minority of revolutionaries who saw themselves perpetuating the true heritage of the Bolshevik revolution. Writing in 1932 Trotsky makes clear the nature of this heritage and tradition:

> The International Left Opposition stands on the ground of the first four Congresses of the Comintern. This does not mean that it bows before every letter of its decisions, many of which had a purely conjunctural character and have been contradicted by subsequent events. But all the essential principles (in relation to imperialism and the bourgeois state, to democracy and reformism; problems of insurrection; the dictatorship of the proletariat; on relations with the peasantry and the oppressed nations; soviets, work in the trade unions; parliamentarianism, the policy of the united front) remain even today the highest expression of proletarian strategy in the epoch of the general crisis of capitalism (cited in Hallas 1977, 14).

As the most uncompromising opponent of Stalin, whom he called the 'gravedigger of the revolution' (Trotsky 1937), Trotsky was to become the figurehead of the Left Opposition.

Amongst the French Communists, both Stalin and Trotsky had their supporters, although the Central Committee had already in 1924 decided to support the anti-Trotsky factions, with only Monatte, Rosmer and Souvarine opposing the line. By the end of 1926 this had become official policy and wholehearted support was given to Stalin against the Opposition as the 'direction du PCF s'engage au coté de la direction russe dans la lutte contre le trotskisme' (Durr 1999, 168). A year later, Trotsky was expelled from the Bolsheviks and began his long period

of banishments and exiles which were to end finally in his assassination in Mexico in 1940. From 1928, Stalin, with the Comintern under his control, defined a new set of strategies for the world Communist parties. These varied from 'the direct struggle for the seizure of power – to the simple defence of bourgeois democracy' (Rosmer 1938). Despite the revolutionary rhetoric used in the so-called Third Period from 1928 to 1934, these strategies were effectively an abandonment of the possibility of world revolution and ensured that the policies of the different national Communist parties did nothing which could put at risk the rapid forced industrialisation of the Soviet Union, which for Stalin was the key to its continued survival. The rhetoric used during the Third Period was designed to portray an image of the heroic workers' state battling to survive at all odds in opposition to antagonistic evil capitalist countries:

> The terminology used would remain internationalist and policies would continue to be presented as in the interests of world communism. But the logic behind the argument was founded on the simple postulate that what was in the interests of the Soviet Union was automatically in the interests of the Comintern (Brower 1968, 2).

It was proclaimed to be a period of 'ascending revolutionary struggle' (Hallas 1979, 67), linked to the first Five Year plan and the forced collectivisation of agriculture in the USSR. Such ideas struck a chord with many workers who were experiencing at first hand the effects of the rise of fascism, unemployment, rising prices and the crisis of capitalism. Social Democratic politicians and union leaders, who called for moderation and conciliation when workers put forward demands to oppose these attacks, were cited by Communist propaganda as being part of the problem and more of an enemy of the working class than the

capitalists or even the fascists. The Communist Parties called for ‘united fronts from below’, but the term was far from that originally developed by the Bolsheviks and Trotsky. For the Stalinists, such united fronts meant organisations wholly established and controlled by them; those workers who wanted to join such alliances could only do so ‘under the sole leadership of the Communists’ (Brower 1968, 3).

Those who did not fully agree were denounced as traitors to the class or even as ‘social fascists.’ This included thousands of workers who maintained their adherence to different types of social democracy. There is no doubt that this ‘class against class’ policy as it became known, created a layer of committed and hardened militants, but it also meant that these same militants isolated themselves from those workers who still followed the Social Democratic leaders so vehemently denounced by the Communists. According to Moscow the French Socialist Party had become a ‘bourgeois party of a new type’ and it was therefore impossible to engage in joint campaigns or electoral agreements with them. The PCF leadership, following the Comintern line, maintained that ‘la social-démocratie constitue un danger bien plus grand que le danger fasciste’ (Joubert 1977, 32). Through its unwillingness, at least at a leadership level, to engage in united action with non-Communist workers, the PCF found itself in ‘ever greater isolation from the mass of the working class and brought about a disastrous drop in membership’ (Kemp 1984, 87). Annie Kriegel, (1966b, 21-25) estimates that the party membership declined from 50,000 in 1928 to 29,000 in 1933.

In Germany in particular, it is arguable that the Third Period policies had the most disastrous and ultimately fatal consequences for the organisations of the working class. The German Social Democratic Party (SPD), wedded as they were to the parliamentary and constitutional systems, refused to engage in 'non-constitutional' methods in order to counter the rise of the Nazis, claiming that as Hitler had been forced to use legal electoral methods to gain power, such methods could also remove him. They did, however, build up workers' defence organisations, the *Reichsbanner*, comprising militants from a wide variety of union, youth and sport organisations. While the *Reichsbanner* had the potential to mobilise hundreds of thousands of workers, the SPD insisted that they were only to be used if the Nazis ever broke the constitution (Harman 1999, 485). Yet many rank-and-file SPD members wanted to fight the Nazis and were prepared to confront them in the factories and on the streets. For its part, from 1929 until January 1933, when Hitler took office as Chancellor, the leadership of the German Communist Party (KPD) refused to countenance any form of united front with the SPD. Furthermore, the KPD leaders went so far as to reject calls by the SPD for any type of anti-fascist alliance, although there were divisions over this, with some showing 'a marked readiness to set up a united front with the Social Democrats to fight the Nazis' (Brower 1968, 7). The KPD did propose a 'red united front' (Communist International 1932, 214) to oppose the Nazis, but this was on the basis of it being an alliance of revolutionaries which had the aim of smashing the capitalist state, a 'proletarian united front under KPD leadership' (Communist International 1932, 214). Such a formulation made it impossible for workers in the SPD to join without first renouncing their reformist ideas, quite the opposite of the process intended by the Comintern theses of 1922.

The result was that the two largest workers' parties never officially engaged in united action to oppose Hitler. It was to pre-empt such difficulties that Trotsky had, in 1931, published the pamphlet *For a workers' united front against fascism.* He argues in the document that the KPD policy considered that 'it is impossible to defeat fascism without first defeating the Social Democracy' (Trotsky 1931a). According to Trotsky, the KPD policy alleged that the SPD were enemies of the working class and that Hitler was a 'lesser evil.' Such a policy, he declared, could only lead to defeat for the working class as a whole. He warned that:

> Should fascism come to power, it will ride over your skulls and spines like a terrific tank. Your salvation lies in merciless struggle. And only a fighting unity with the Social Democratic workers can bring victory.

It was thus absolutely vital, he maintained, that the KPD unite with the SPD in a 'common front of direct struggle against fascism, embracing the entire proletariat.' Despite the reluctance of KPD leaders to build a united front, some rank-and-file Communist militants did, in the face of violence from the Nazi paramilitary forces and police repression, continue their activity against the Hitler government. However, after the Reichstag fire in February the KPD was banned and Communist officials and deputies were arrested, put to flight, or simply murdered. Ten thousand of its members were swiftly sent to concentration camps. The SPD was in turn banned five months later and its members dealt with in the same manner.

The divisions between the workers' parties in Germany were replicated to an extent in France, as was the danger from the extreme right, in the shape of the fascist *ligues*. However, due to pressure from rank-and-file workers on the union leaderships to resist, both the effects of the economic slump and attempts by employers to maintain profits at workers' expense, there had developed a greater demand for co-operation between the Socialists and Communists. Despite the divisions between the leaderships of these workers' parties and union confederations, rank-and-file workers increasingly called for cooperation in order to withstand the employers' offensive (*La Vérité* 1934, 3). Furthermore, broad based anti-fascist committees had begun to spring up throughout France (*Ligue communiste* 1933, 22), which successfully brought together in common struggle militants from the PCF who were prepared to break Comintern discipline, ordinary SFIO members as well as those workers who were not aligned to any party (Craipeau 1999, 114), (Joubert 1977, 34). However, it was the mass demonstrations and the attempt to storm parliament and overthrow the government on the 6 February 1934, by the *Croix-de-Feu* and other French fascists such as *l'Action française*, which finally brought the workers' parties together. Both had separately called for a show of strength against the extreme right through strikes and through demonstrations in Paris on the 12 February. During the course of these protests, marchers from the two demonstrations spontaneously came together, chanting the same anti-fascist slogans and calling for unity of action. Following these events, rank-and-file pressure for united action against the fascists increased inside the PCF, causing difficulties and some dissension against the party leadership. Only days previously *L'Humanité*, the PCF newspaper, had been equating the SFIO with the fascists (Bron 1970, 205),

but a number of PCF branches, most notably those in the Paris suburb of Saint Denis, were openly calling for unity with the Socialists (Brower 1968, 31-67). It was only after intervention by the Comintern in April that the PCF was able to offer 'a united front of struggle' to the Socialists (Brower 1968, 49). This volte face by the PCF, together with Moscow's official sanction for united action, came just as the Communist International was abandoning its Third Period policy of 'class against class.' With Hitler and the Nazis in power, Germany became a threat to the security of the USSR. To ensure its defence the Soviet state found it necessary to create alliances with Social Democratic governments and pro-capitalist parties who had until recently been seen as the principal enemies. The Soviet leadership needed to reassure the western powers that it was no longer a threat. As a result, by the time of the seventh and last World Congress of the Comintern in the spring of 1935, it was calling for the creation of 'the United People's Front in the struggle for peace and against the instigations of war. All those interested in the preservation of peace should be drawn into this united front' (Degras 1964, 375). According to Brower (1968, 51), '[t]he coincidence in time between the reorientation of Soviet foreign policy and the revision of Comintern tactics is striking.'

The Popular Front

The result of this change in policy was that, in October 1934, the leaderships of the SFIO and PCF, and later their respective union confederations, CGT and CGTU, agreed to work together in what was eventually to become the Popular Front. However as Brower notes (1968, Ch 2), this 'united front from above' was to become not just an alliance of the two main workers' parties in France but,

crucially, one which included members of the Radical Party representing the interests of the bourgeoisie or middle class. Furthermore this new version, 'not a change in policy, but in tactics' (Communist International 1934, 332), was a unity agreement initiated by the leaderships of these political parties, with little rank-and-file involvement in the determination of policies. As such, it differed markedly from the united front as formulated by the Comintern Fourth Congress. This stated clearly that:

> The main aim of the united front tactic is to unify the working masses through agitation and organisation. The real success of the united front tactic depends on a movement "from below", from the rank-and-file of the working masses (Communist International, 1922a).

Any demands that threatened the unity of the alliance by going beyond the confines of the national struggle against the fascist threat were rejected. Organisation and action to stop fascism, while seen by some as a necessary first step, is not in itself revolutionary and so 'could be pursued in alliance with declared enemies of the revolution' (Carr 1982, 426). This put the PCF in a contradictory position. Having pursued a policy devoted to the immediate destruction of French capitalism during the Third Period, it now reversed its position in line with the new Comintern policy. Maintaining that 'first we fight the fascists, then we fight for the socialist revolution', the PCF created what the Trotskyists considered to be an unnecessary separation between the two struggles. While the first was immediately acted upon by the PCF, the second was, to all intents and purposes, relegated to an unspecified time in the distant future.

Moreover, with Hitler and the Nazis firmly established in Germany, the prime concern of the Comintern was the defence of the USSR, not the pursuit of revolution abroad. The French government, equally concerned by the threat that Nazi Germany posed to its national interests, was now considered by Moscow to be a potential ally. This was confirmed after France signed a non-aggression pact with the USSR in May 1935. To underline its support for this, the PCF wholeheartedly backed government measures introduced to encourage French rearmament. The French republic and its institutions were now being defended by a political party which had until then been committed, at least in theory, to its destruction. As the Comintern itself notes:

> Thorez struck a patriotic note: 'The united front, the people's front, the feeling of attachment to our country, the true unification of France—all these questions, already old or still quite new, had to be explained and interpreted by the central committee. . . . We boldly deprived our enemies of the things they had stolen from us and trampled underfoot. We took back the Marseillaise and the tricolour (Communist International 1936, 384).

The consequent postponement of overtly anti-capitalist policies by the PCF and support for French 'republican values', including the singing of the *Marseillaise* instead of the *Internationale* at meetings and rallies, was designed to ensure that middle class Radicals could, without fear, join the Popular Front. Communists were 'transformed into devoted Republicans, Jacobins, protectors of France's national heritage against the barbarians' (Ross 1982, 9). The PCF, knowing that the Socialists and Radicals would not support mass mobilisations of workers other than those related to the anti-fascist struggle, and not wanting to put at risk the new alliance, effectively abandoned any form of revolutionary anti-capitalist

actions, interventions or propaganda. Instead, they put their energies into developing electoral activities designed to attract the broad mass of workers as well as sections of the middle class. In doing so, they dropped much of their previous revolutionary vocabulary from election manifestos and replaced it with demands for limited reforms calculated, according to Maurice Thorez, to 'rally certain elements of the French population which do not follow us yet.'[42] Thus the united front was transformed, from an alliance based on workers' independent activity, into an electoral coalition.

From the outset Trotsky and his supporters had argued against this new alliance, seeing the People's Front, as it was originally called, as 'nothing else than the organisation of class collaboration between the political exploiters of the proletariat (the reformists and the Stalinists) and the political exploiters of the petty bourgeoisie (the Radicals)' (Trotsky 1974, 101). Furthermore, by conceding to the demands of the bourgeoisie and political parties of the right and thus being obliged to 'restrict their activity to the program of the Radical Party' (Trotsky 1974, 100), workers would in effect be demobilised and the class struggle effectively compromised and weakened. The result, Trotsky maintained, would be that direct and immediate industrial struggle would be supplemented by reformist electioneering. Working class demands would be reduced to their bare minimum, and the ability of the working class to put forward its own political agenda compromised.

[42] Quoted in Socialist newspaper *Le Populaire*, 2 Feb 1936. (Brower 1968, 74).

In the May to June 1936 parliamentary elections, as a result of a broad-based enthusiasm for unity, the Popular Front alliance won an overwhelming electoral victory, in which the PCF won 76 seats. But this cross-class unity was to be questioned by many workers when, during the explosion of strikes and factory occupations which followed the election, PCF members attempted to hasten the return to work. Speaking at the PCF Central Committee meeting on 13 June, Thorez reinforced this return by stating that 'nous avons le devoir de ne pas risquer que se dissocie ce bloc que nous avons constitué avec des ouvriers, des paysans et des classes moyennes' (PCF 1936). Party militants in leadership positions of the reunited CGT at local, regional and national levels, who discouraged workers from continuing with their strikes and factory occupations, were in many cases vigorously opposed by rank-and-file workers. There was undoubtedly widespread enthusiasm amongst workers for the initial reforms carried through by the new Popular Front government. In the short term, these certainly made life more bearable for the majority of the population. But the movement from below, while systematically associated with the electoral campaigns and eventual establishment of the Popular Front government, was nevertheless imbued with workers' consciousness, aims and objectives and so qualitively different from the 'mésalliance, sur le plan parlementaire et électoral, du radicalisme bourgeois et du stalinisme, sous le signe de la défense nationale' (Kergoat 1994, 99). In order to differentiate it from the purely electoral alliance, Daniel Guérin (1997, 163) called the powerful popular movement initiated by workers, which stressed unity of action from below, the 'Front Populaire No 2.' In this movement he saw the possibilities for a genuine workers' united front.

Trotsky went even further, pronouncing that 'the French revolution has begun' (Trotsky 1974, 131).

By the end of 1936 the stance of the PCF was, arguably, to the right of the Socialists. Indeed, it even went so far as to call for a transformation of the Popular Front into a 'French Front' by incorporating into the alliance some right-wing conservatives who were, for nationalist reasons, anti-German. The struggles against fascism, and therefore support for French rearmament and the defence of the USSR, took precedence over the revolutionary struggle for socialism, as the left in Spain was later to discover to its cost. The rhetoric and terminology of the united front tactic were at times used by the PCF, but the strategic aim of the party meant that any thoughts of autonomous self-organisation by rank-and-file workers were out of the question. Furthermore, they were not prepared to allow any industrial disputes that put the government at risk, and used apparently imaginary plots by Trotskyists and other revolutionaries as a means of putting a brake on workers' demands. Along with the CGT leadership they warned workers against allowing themselves to be provoked by Trotskyists and taking any action which could lead to the fall of the government. They held this position for the two years following the establishment of the Popular Front government, even as the gains made by workers in June 1936, came under increasing attack from employers and the government itself. Industrial conflicts in the form of 'wildcat' strikes and factory occupations did occur. But these were not supported by the PCF and CGT leaderships until the very end of 1938, by which time the

PCF had left the Popular Front in protest at the Government's support for Hitler's annexation of the Sudetenland.[43]

The united front: towards a working definition

Trotsky's writings during this period, while focused on the struggle against fascism, nevertheless drew upon the united front tactic as applied by the Bolsheviks, and sought to apply it to the situation facing the French working class. As part of a strategy orientated towards organisation and activity determined by rank-and-file workers, the united front tactic, or 'policy' as he sometimes called it, could be used by revolutionaries as an overarching guide when faced with differing economic and political situations. The underlying aim of this, however, was the eventual conquest of power and the overthrow of capitalism. Through active participation in united fronts, workers would be exposed to revolutionary ideas in practice. Trotsky makes the point that the initial stages of any united front coalition are likely to be undertaken as a defensive struggle in order to protect previously-won rights and conditions. Only when others were united with revolutionaries in such struggles, could the working class then take the offensive and initiate a socialist revolution:

> One must bear in mind that the policy of the united front is in general much more effective for the defensive than the offensive. The more conservative or backward strata of the proletariat are more easily drawn into a struggle to fight for what they already have than for new conquests (Trotsky 1932).

[43] The 'Munich Agreement' of 30 September 1938.

To summarise, the key characteristics of the united front that can be identified in the writings of Trotsky are as follows:

- A united front is a coalition of revolutionary, reformist and non-aligned workers, often, though not always, initiated by revolutionaries.
- Such a coalition has an agreed common aim.
- In the first instance this aim is likely to be used as a tactic consisting of specific immediate demands designed to defend previously-won economic, political or social rights or freedoms.
- Within the alliance the revolutionary party maintains its political independence and ability to contest and criticise decisions and policies.
- The intention for revolutionaries is to win political influence and thus convince workers to break with reformist ideas.
- Revolutionaries promote rank-and-file action by workers and democratic decision-making processes from below. However, even though a united front cannot be imposed from above, as a particular struggle develops unity must also be built between the leaderships of the differing parties.
- United fronts can take a variety of forms dependent upon changing circumstances and situations. They can be components within longer-term strategies as well as short-term tactical considerations. A united front can, over the medium-term, bring workers together around broad, ongoing political issues in a coalition with more permanence than those designed simply to win short-term demands.
- In due course revolutionaries hope to move from defensive to offensive demands designed to question the legitimacy of the capitalist status quo.

- The distinction between a united front and a popular front is that the former is ‘an alliance of workers’ parties for limited demands.’ While the second is an alliance ‘in which communists drop their specifically socialist programme’ (Birchall 2004, 87) so as to be able to form a merger with middle class parties.

This chapter has considered how the united front tactic was developed and implemented by Communist revolutionaries during the first decades of the twentieth century. I have shown how the eventual divisions between these revolutionaries, into those supporting Stalin and those supporting Trotsky, led to different interpretations of the united front thesis as formulated at the Fourth Congress of the Communist International in 1922. By the second half of the 1920s, Stalin’s supporters had gained control of Communist Parties throughout the world, including the PCF, from which point the Trotskyists were confined to playing an increasingly marginalised oppositional role within the international workers’ movement. In spite of this, Trotsky, having been instrumental in the formulation of the 1922 thesis, went on to further develop the tactic, particularly in response to the rise of fascism in Germany. In *The German Catastrophe: The Responsibility of the Leadership*, written in May 1933, Trotsky claimed that the application of the united front policy as a tactic is ‘imposed by the dialectics of the class struggle’ (Trotsky 1933). By this he meant that revolutionaries must always take account of the realities of the circumstances in which they find themselves, through an analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of their own and other workers’ organisations, as well as those of the capitalist class and their supporters. Nevertheless, he maintained that certain principles underlie and

remain constant in the creation of any united front, the most fundamental of which was that they can only involve workers, whether they be revolutionaries, reformists or non-aligned. In this Trotskyists differed from the interpretation of the united front as promoted by Stalin and the Comintern, whose followers in the PCF initially refused to unite with other workers unless they supported Communist leadership, and then, in a seeming reversal of this position, united with middle class or bourgeois participants in the creation of the Popular Front. The Trotskyist position can be further characterised by the emphasis it placed upon building united fronts from below, involving mass involvement and control by rank-and-file workers. The Stalinists, on the other hand, tended to impose united fronts from above, and controlled them through a strictly hierarchical leadership system.

I intend to treat Trotsky's writings, as summarised above, as the paradigm of the united front as used by revolutionary socialists both historically and in the present day. For the purposes of this study, therefore, the Trotskyist model forms the basis for the analysis of the various case studies investigated. The following chapters investigate and assess the success or otherwise of attempts by French Trotskyists agitating within the union movement, to build and use the united fronts in three different historical periods. My contention is that these attempts have, over the long term, enabled the French Trotskyist parties to successfully achieve a level of recognition and influence in both the industrial and political spheres which is perhaps surprising given the relatively small numbers of activists involved. I show that through their involvement in united front agitation, particularly in the workplace, but also as part of wider social movements,

Trotskyist militants have at times been able to provide an alternative leadership and organisation to that provided by the established trade union bureaucracies. This alternative has been focused upon the maximum possible mobilisation of rank-and-file trade unionists. While this has not yet resulted in Trotskyist parties becoming mass workers' organisations or the achievement of a socialist revolution, it has nevertheless resulted at times in significant numbers of French workers questioning the authority of the capitalist status quo. In purely electoral terms, for example, Trotskyists have, since 1999, regularly achieved between 5 and 10 per cent of votes cast in national, regional and local elections. In some individual constituencies this has been as much as 18 per cent. Inside the major trade unions, Trotskyists have been elected to leadership positions and they are a major driving force behind the smaller 'autonomous' union organisations such as SUD.

Through the following case studies I show how the practice and relevance of the united front tactic are still debated by present-day Trotskyists (Sabado 2008, Verdon 2007). While specific social, economic or political aims may differ, those involved continue to promote the necessity of unity and the desire to agitate 'tous ensemble' (Béroud, Mouriaux & Vakaloulis 1998, 106).

Chapter Three

The 1936 Hotchkiss strike: the united front tested in practice

In the previous chapter I examined the theory of the united front tactic and highlighted a number of characteristics deemed to be essential components for its successful application. Making extensive use of archive materials and contemporary newspaper reports, the following chapters will focus on case studies from three different periods of the twentieth century when Trotskyists attempted to build united fronts amongst workers within the French trade union and labour movement. This chapter is concerned in particular with the strike in 1936, at the Hotchkiss automobile and armaments factory in Levallois-Perret, an industrial suburb to the northwest of Paris. The strike and workers' occupation of the Hotchkiss factory present a clear example of how Trotskyists and their supporters were for a short time able to play a leading role in the events.

A rising wave of strikes and occupations had been building up since January 1936, but this rapidly escalated after the announcement of the Popular Front victory at the beginning of May, and the formation of the new government, an alliance between the Socialists and Radicals supported by the Communists. After having suffered a substantial reduction in their standard of living over the previous five years, workers were generally more optimistic at this time that they could bring about a transformation in their lives. They were putting forward economic demands related to improving wages and working conditions. Many were spontaneously stopping work, without referring to or obtaining the sanction of the trade union leaderships, to such an extent that, according to one account, 'les chefs suivaient les troupes, sans savoir où cette aventure les mènerait'

(Delmas 1950, 93). The relative spontaneity of the movement and the fact that neither the CGT leaderships[44] nor those of the established mainstream political parties were initiating the strikes, created an opportunity for the Trotskyists to intervene and attempt to influence the direction of the strike movement. Trotskyists from the *Parti ouvrier internationaliste* (POI) now considered the PCF to no longer be a revolutionary party and that the Popular Front was a form of 'class collaboration' which was not in the long-term interests of the working class. In response to the strikes however, they 'most thoroughly rejoiced in the manifestations of mass spontaneity' (Ehrmann 1971, 38).

While they may have celebrated the upsurge in industrial militancy, the Trotskyist forces were in most areas inadequate and unable to meet the demands of what they took to be a potentially revolutionary situation. This was not the case though in Levallois, where there were at least twelve experienced Trotskyist militants (Attias 1982, 95). Through being at the forefront of activities such as writing and distributing leaflets and tracts, organising local union members, debating and drawing up workers' demands and ultimately arguing for political as well as economic demands, they were able to establish a presence in their factories. The emphasis of their interventions was on building unity at a grass-roots level amongst workers within and across factories and industries. Their focus was to build a network of factory committees and workers' councils controlled by rank and file workers which would eventually be able to provide an alternative to the unions which, according to the Trotskyists, were manipulated

[44] In September 1935, the CGT and CGTU trade union confederations agreed to formally reunite, which they achieved at a conference held in Toulouse in March 1936, after a separation of 15 years. The Central Committee of the reformed CGT was comprised of 6 former CGT leaders and 2 from the CGTU.

by the PCF and their supporters. Through focusing upon the active participation of rank-and-file workers, regardless of their political affiliation, they attempted in the Hotchkiss factory to develop an independent strike committee. As a consequence of electing immediately recallable delegates, the policies and direction of this committee were shaped and implemented by the workers themselves and not determined in advance by the permanent trade union leaderships. Furthermore, it aimed to expand its influence and bring together workers from neighbouring factories and workplaces, not only those involved in the metallurgical industry. Indeed such aims, combined with the importance it gave to direct democracy and independence, eventually brought the strike committee it into conflict with the regional officials of the CGT.

When mobilising for the annual commemoration of the Paris Commune in May 1936, the PCF made what later came to be seen as a rhetorical call, for the establishment throughout the country, of workers' councils or soviets (*L'Humanité*, 24 May 1936). The POI, emphasising the necessity of building a united front against the employers and government, used this call as a means around which to agitate for the establishment of such workers' councils. For the Trotskyists, a network of soviets would represent a radical enhancement of the established trade union confederations, possibly leading to a situation of dual power, in which reformist and revolutionary workers' organisations competed for supremacy. While the trade unions brought workers together, and arguably could be considered as types of united front, they habitually did not question the legitimacy of capitalism itself and limited their actions to obtaining what was possible within the existing economic and social order. On the other hand, taking

the 1917 Russian revolution as their reference point, soviets for the POI were organisations which contested the status quo and as such were a more advanced representation of a united front.

The following section of this chapter notes the first national mention of the developments at the Hotchkiss factory in June 1936 and examines how, due in part to the united front tactic employed by the POI, a workers' council and strike committee was created, not only independently of the regional and national CGT leaderships, but also independently of those of the Communist and Socialist parties. In order to fully comprehend their role during the events of the summer of 1936, I then briefly explain how the different components of the Trotskysist movement, following interventions by Trotsky, united into one organisation so as to be better able to intervene in the industrial action. Next, I examine in detail how the Trotskyists attempted to expand the composition of the Hotchkiss committee by incorporating workers from surrounding factories. I give examples of how workers in other local factories were involved in the strike movement and the role that Trotskyists played in these. This is followed by a consideration of the wider reactions to the strike committee, including those by the CGT and PCF. This includes an examination of the role played in the strike committee by POI militant and former PCF member Georges Chéron. The chapter then contrasts this version of a united front in practice, with two others in which Trotskyists were highly involved: *L'Opposition unitaire*, in the period before the election of the Popular Front government and *le Cercle syndicaliste lutte de classe* in the subsequent period. These two bodies were different from the Hotchkiss committee in that they both focused for the most part only on organising activists

already within the unions, the first inside the CGTU and the second inside the CGT, and were not directly involved at the time in industrial action. However, they do represent attempts by Trotskyists to construct alliances of workers having differing political viewpoints. The final section of the chapter concludes with a comparison and evaluation of the success or otherwise of the three attempts at building united fronts.

The early development of the Hotchkiss Strike Committee

In the early summer of 1936 workers throughout France were engaged in a series of factory occupations and an extensive general strike, the largest in French history up until that time,[45] aimed – according to participants in the movement – at ensuring that the newly-elected Popular Front government carried through immediate reforms which would be of real benefit to the French working class. With support from the PCF,[46] the socialist Prime Minister, Léon Blum, had a clear parliamentary majority with 376 seats out of 610.[47] The election of the new government was seen by many as an expression of the desire for a radical change in society and this was reflected in the circumstances surrounding the events at the Hotchkiss factory. These first came to prominence following an article in the PCF daily newspaper *L'Humanité* (10 June 1936). This reported on a meeting that had taken place the previous day in the factory, where workers were on strike, had set up a strike committee and had occupied the buildings. The Levallois industrial area had a long tradition of industrial militancy and left-wing political radicalism. For example, since 1932 the local parliamentary *député* was

[45] Official statistics noted 12,142 strikes and 1,830,938 workers going on strike in June (Jackson 1988, 85).
[46] The PCF and SFIO had in July 1934 agreed to work together in a *Pacte d'unité d'action*.
[47] The most significant winner was the PCF which won 76 seats and doubled its vote, totaling 1,462,000 compared to 783,000 in the 1932 parliamentary elections (Barjonet 1968, 34).

the PCF member Louis Honel, who held the seat until the Nazi occupation in 1940. Accordingly, the Popular Front victory was greeted with enthusiasm by the majority of the *Levalloisiens*. Two days before the publication of the article referred to above in *L'Humanité,* the government, employers and the recently reunited[48] CGT had signed the Matignon Agreements.[49] The national leaders of the unions were now trying to convince workers to return to work. The Hotchkiss strike committee, independently of the CGT official procedure, attracted to their meeting delegates from the different Hotchkiss factories in Levallois and the neighbouring suburb of Saint Denis. They also invited delegates from 33 other metalworking factories in St Ouen, Clichy and la Courneuve. One of the purposes of the meeting was to assess whether their list of demands had been achieved. In the ensuing discussion they welcomed the Matignon Agreements but felt that the concessions won did not go far enough and, for example, demanded the immediate signing by the Hotchkiss employers of contracts giving workers guaranteed minimum wages (Bertin 1936). In addition, they wanted to ensure that workers in other factories had also achieved their demands. To this end, the meeting decided to set up a Central Committee in order to be able to represent and co-ordinate their interventions with delegates from other factories. Furthermore, the delegates wanted to pursue other more radical economic, social and political demands and were not prepared to call off the strikes and occupations. It was these developments in particular which began to cause concern to the regional union officials of the CGT.

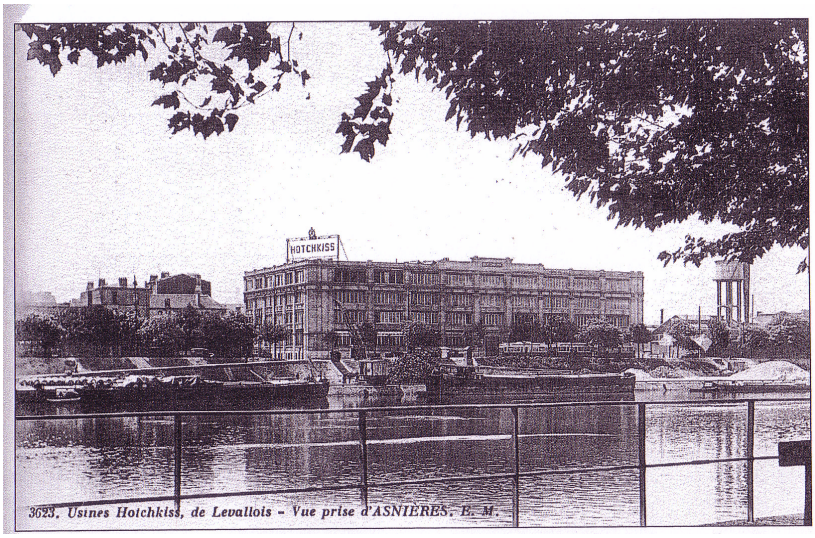
[48] See footnote 19, Chapter One.

[49] Agreements reached between the Popular Front government, the employers (CGPF) and the trade unions (CGT). As a result workers obtained wage raises of between 7 and 15 per cent, collective work contracts, recognition of trade union shop stewards and representatives and confirmation of the introduction of the 40 hour working week and two weeks paid holiday a year.

The PCF had a significant degree of influence amongst metalworkers in many of the factories of Levallois, influence which it had built up since the 1920s. Through its leadership of many of the unions within the CGT, the PCF had played a dominant role in the building of the strikes and demonstrations. The national leadership of the PCF, however, supported the attempts by the CGT leaders to convince workers to end their strikes, causing tensions between them and local Communist militants on the factory floors (Chapman 1991, 91). In common with elsewhere in the country, both the PCF and the CGT in Levallois saw an unprecedented increase in their memberships during the strikes. This newly radicalised membership saw an opportunity to make profound improvements to their lives. Many, though not all, were drawn towards the goal, historically promoted by the PCF, of revolutionary change and the establishing of soviets on the model of the 1917 Russian Revolution. It was in response to such sentiments and aware that workers had already started to occupy their factories, that the PCF had made its call for 'les soviets partout' (Craipeau 1971, 180). This slogan had been frequently used by the PCF during the period from 1928 to 1934 when, conforming to Comintern directives, it had pursued its isolationist, and arguably sectarian, *classe contre classe* policy. For example, Louis Aragon, writing in *l'Humanité* (14 July 1934), states that:

> C'est le cri par lequel ouvriers, paysans et soldat réclament le pouvoir, l'organisation pour la prise du pouvoir comme l'organisation pour l'exercice du pouvoir. C'est le cri qui, face à la dictature bourgeoise, appelle la dictature du prolétariat.

Indeed, the PCF continued to use what appeared to be revolutionary terminology in its publications[50] and public pronouncements. 'Quand nous terminons nos discours en acclamant la France libre, forte et heureuse, il y a un écho: les Soviets partout' (Thorez 1936, 624). In doing so, it hoped to attract to its ranks workers inspired by such language and ideas. Trotsky himself admitted that they were successful in their endeavours; '[t]he main section of revolutionary workers is now following the PCF' (Trotsky 1974, 136). For their part, the POI described the PCF and their pronouncements as being 'pseudo-révolutionnaire' (Craipeau 1971, 179). The term soviet, they maintained, was not used to invoke the type of democratic workers' committees and organisations as set up during the 1905 and 1917 revolutions, but more ones promoting the existing contemporary Russian regime. The POI aimed to use the contradiction, as they saw it, between the revolutionary rhetoric and the reformist practice of the PCF, in order to attract militant workers towards their position.



Above, the Hotchkiss factory in Levallois circa 1936. (copyright Schweitzer-Thomas (1996, 69)).

[50] For example, writing in the *Cahiers du bolchévisme*, the journal of the PCF central committee, Jacques Duclos explained that the goal of the PCF was to establish workers' power and it would use all its strength to build 'la République française des Soviets' (Duclos 1936, 619).

Trotskyist unity and the *Parti ouvrier internationaliste*

Before examining further developments at Hotchkiss and in order to fully understand the context and significance of the role played in it by Trotskyists militants, we need to look briefly at developments which had recently taken place within the Trotskyist movement generally. Prior to the industrial unrest in 1936 the Trotskyists, like other components of the workers' movement in France, were also divided amongst themselves.[51] It was only in response to the rapidly developing strike movement and calls from Trotsky himself that they had reunited to form one party, the POI. As part of what had been known as the 'left opposition,' the Trotskyists had been expelled from the PCF in 1928 and went on to create their own party, the *Ligue communiste* (LC). With an estimated initial total membership of only 100 (Craipeau 1971, 45) and most of these in the Paris region, they were always at a numerical disadvantage with regards to the PCF who, at the time, had in the region of 39,000 members (Kriegel 1966b, 22).[52] Later internal tactical disagreements about whether or not to dissolve and enter into the SFIO resulted in the creation by mid-1935 of two distinct parties, the *Groupe bolchevik-léniniste* (GBL) led by Pierre Naville and the *Parti communiste internationaliste* (PCI) led by Raymond Molinier and Pierre Frank. Trotsky maintained that in a situation of heightened class struggle and worker mobilisations as epitomised by the 1936 strikes and occupations, only one revolutionary party could take the lead and so according to him, their realignment became an absolute necessity. Comparing the situation to Russia in 1917, Trotsky called upon his supporters to play a full part in the industrial

[51] In his study of Trotskyism, Bensaïd (2002, 34) identifies five major 'tactical changes' of direction in the period up until 1939, all of which resulted in serious divergences between the various elements of French Trotskyism.

[52] By June 1936 the PCF claimed to have 173,900 members (*L'Humanité* 4 June 1936) and by December 288,483 (Kriegel 1966b, 29).

action, stating that 'the fate of France is being settled in the factories where the way out of capitalist anarchy has been shown in action. The place of revolutionists is in the factories!'(1974, 129). The newly formed POI had already, by the end of May, published and distributed an agitational leaflet which urged workers to 'couvrir tout le pays d'un réseau de Comités de masse, d'entreprises, de soldats, de paysans pauvres et de travailleurs des champs, c'est-à-dire de Soviets' (POI 1936). Different versions of the leaflet were produced over the next weeks, each corresponding to the circumstances faced by local branches of the POI. But they all had in common the desire to translate into reality the call to build soviets made by the PCF. Three days later on 12 June, the POI published the first copy of its newspaper *La Lutte Ouvrière*, which was promptly seized and impounded by the Popular Front government.[53] While Trotsky wrote that the strikes and occupations were in his view the 'classic beginning of a revolution' (1974, 133), he was well aware of the fact that his supporters were thin on the ground and that they would face immense difficulties attempting to influence events. Nevertheless, he was optimistic that they could make contact with the newly radicalised militants and strike leaders thrown up by the occupations.

In describing the state of affairs as the first phase of a revolution, Trotsky regarded these strike leaders as the first elements of a revolutionary leadership, who, without waiting for directives from the union leaderships, had spontaneously organised many of the strikes and occupations. But, to be successful, this new French revolution needed 'a staff and plan of proletarian

[53] Interestingly the *Bibliothèque nationale de France* archives still do not have a copy of this seized edition. In total, 5 editions of the newspaper were impounded by the authorities during 1936.

revolution' (Trotsky 1974, 134), in order to counter the staff and plan of the '200 families.'[54] In order to deal with such a powerful group, 'the crown of the system of finance capital,' he declared that 'it is necessary to overthrow the economic and political regime' (Trotsky 1974, 119). Furthermore, he maintained this task was not one which could be left to the Popular Front, given its alliance with the bourgeoisie in the form of the Radical Party:

> The issue here is not a struggle of the 'nation' against a handful of magnates as *L'Humanité* pictures it, but the struggle of the proletariat against the bourgeoisie. It is a question of the class struggle which can only be resolved by revolution' (Trotsky 1974, 119).

Despite their numerical inferiority, the POI threw their full weight behind the strikes and occupations. Their leaflet 'Soviets' was produced with this in mind, as an agitational tool and as a means to promote the building of united fronts with other trade unionists inside the factories and workplaces. As noted in Chapter Two, Trotsky considered soviet-style organisation to be 'the highest form of the united front.' Moreover, it was focused upon rank-and-file worker democracy and self-organisation, two concepts which Trotskyists had endorsed and had continually agitated for since their expulsion from the PCF eight years previously. The PCF on the other hand did not encourage autonomous organisation of workers, its call for soviets was more intended as a justification for the establishment of party-controlled workers' councils which could relay downwards the decisions of the CGT and PCF leaderships.

[54] This is a reference to the 200 richest and most powerful industrial families who were said to control all aspects of French political and economic life.

During the last week of May, the POI branch in the Paris suburb of Aulnay produced a version of the 'Soviets' leaflet which made clear the Trotskyist interpretation of the PCF slogan:

> Trop longtemps on a crié "les soviets partout" sans rien faire d'ailleurs pour les créer. Formons des Comités de front populaire de masse ou la masse ait la parole ! C'est le premier pas vers les SOVIETS (POI 1936a).

Furthermore, the leaflet went on to outline their programme and also mentioned other demands, including the setting up of workers' militia, the establishment of equal political rights for the young, women, immigrants and soldiers, the 40 hour week, workers' control of industry, the expropriation of the 200 richest families and the arrest of fascist leaders. The leaflet closed with an internationalist and what could be considered to be a far-sighted slogan which proclaimed 'Vive les états-unis socialistes d'Europe!'

Importantly though, the POI saw that their demands could not be achieved without wide support and so a common thread to all their literature at the time was the need to create united fronts with as many workers as possible. This is illustrated in a letter sent in the first week of June by the POI in the 10th *arrondissement* of Paris to members of the Communist and Socialist parties. The letter called for 'un front unique de lutte' and the need to 'établir une liaison entre tous les Comités d'usine existants' (POI 1936b). This call to the two major parties[55] of the Popular Front was largely ignored and rejected by their leaderships and those of the trade unions. But calls for united action did strike a

[55] The Trotskyists considered both the PCF and SFIO to be reformist parties.

chord with some rank-and-file members. Where individual Trotskyists were able to make successful interventions in the strikes and occupations on such a basis, creating a sympathetic audience for their ideas, then workers were prepared to elect them as workshop representatives and support their calls to take the movement further (Kergoat 1986, 169). Rioux (1973, 173) claims that:

> Rien ne prouve que dans l'hypothèse d'une direction politique et syndicale laissant jouer la dynamique révolutionnaire de la grève, ils n'auraient pas rallié à leurs idées une bonne partie de ceux qui ---- pour aller plus loin? --- vont brutalement gonfler les effectifs de la C.G.T. et du P.C.

Furthermore support for these activists sometimes came from ordinary members of the PCF and SFIO. 'Ils ont pu rencontrer sympathie et collaboration de la part de militants communistes ou socialistes sans consignes formelles de leurs partis' (Prost 1967, 71).

Strikes in Levallois and the further development of the Hotchkiss Strike Committee

At the Hotchkiss factory the workers called for a further meeting to take place on Thursday, 11 June, with the declared intention of forming a *Comité central* comprising of delegates from all local workplaces as well as representatives from the metalworking section of the CGT, the *Fédération des métaux.* The committee was to be controlled by rank-and-file workers and bring together delegates from a variety of factories and workplaces, not just those involved in the metalworking industries. 'Nous prions toutes les usines de se faire représenter à cette conférence par 1 ou 2 délégués' (*L'Humanité,* 11 June 1936). The expectation

was that by bringing the best militants together into one body it would be able to begin to break down the existing separations between members of different union federations and industries and to determine a common course of action. Representatives were to be elected from the assembled delegates and be directly accountable to them. The intention was to create a democratic structure based on workplace organisation with delegates controlled by the base, rather than from above by officials from a union hierarchy determined on sectional or regional grounds. Such a structure, 'implicitly challenging the established union leadership' (Torigian 1999, 113), was completely different to that currently existing in the CGT, where a relatively few regional and national officials determined policy and practice, and attempted to control the actions of union members on the factory floors. In the initial aftermath of the Matignon Agreements these officials, in a significant number of cases, did not have enough influence to persuade the most militant workers to bring the strikes to a close. Rank-and-file workers had, in the building of their strike committees 'demonstrated a certain mistrust of the CGT' and an increasing awareness of their own power and ability to determine the direction of the strikes and occupations (Torigian 1999, 113).

The collective strength and confidence of shop floor workers at Hotchkiss had earlier been demonstrated two weeks before the significant 9 June meeting. On the morning of 26 May the Hotchkiss management dismissed 16 workers for demanding recognition for workers' representatives, a minimum hourly wage of 5 francs 50 and the abolition of enforced overtime. These demands, pre-figuring some later incorporated into the Matignon Agreements, and others such as that

for a 40 hour week and paid holidays, had already been raised by workers in factories elsewhere in Levallois and the Paris industrial region. A list of ten similar workers' demands had been published in a CGT newspaper in April (*L'Union des métaux*, April 1936). By early afternoon workers in the factory came out on strike, demanding that the 16 be immediately reinstated. The strength and solidarity shown by the striking workers enabled the elected shop stewards from the factory, Mugnier and Thirion, to persuade initially hesitant CGT officials from the *Fédération des métaux* to join the workers' delegation in their negotiations with Bourdon, the factory manager. Throughout the country it was a common phenomenon at the beginning of the strike wave for workers to want to involve the union apparatus (Schwarz 1937, 60). Workers at this time, including those at Hotchkiss, fully expected the union apparatus to support workers' demands. A level of scepticism about the role of the union leadership only developed at a later date. By 9 pm, after having been on strike for only six and a half hours, the demands of the strikers for the reinstatement of their dismissed colleagues were met by management. Furthermore, they acquiesced to general pay increases for all workers in the factory and even agreed to pay wages for the half day strike. They also entered into negotiations over the demand for the introduction of paid holidays. It was noted in *L'Humanité* (27 May and 28 May 1936), that a victory parade was held and the workers marched out of the factory singing the *Internationale*. The following day, workers at the Renault factory in Boulogne-Billancourt went on strike. Buoyed up by their victory, the Hotchkiss workers felt confident enough to send a sizeable delegation to the gates of the Renault factory in response to their call for solidarity action (Badie

1972, 81). The support they received was such that the next day the Renault workers began a full occupation of their factory (Broué & Dorey 1966, 100).

As the strikes and occupations throughout France multiplied towards the end of May and the beginning of June, more and more workers were taking action with an intensity that surprised established union officials. This was an unknown and difficult situation for the CGT. In order to maintain a modicum of control in such situations, workplace-based union leaders were obliged to go along with the demands of their fellow workers. If they did not, they ran the risk of being replaced by new leaders.

Given the concentration of factories and workshops in the commune, it is not surprising that workers in Levallois, including those at Hotchkiss, participated fully in this movement. Many workers in Levallois (Depreux 1972, 96), particularly those in the metallurgical industry (Prost 1967, 78), played a leading role in the events. On 7 June, the Hotchkiss workers were once again at the forefront of a solidarity action in a neighbouring factory. The owner of the Sainte-Geneviève biscuit factory, Lucien Clément, wrote a letter to the mayor of Levallois, Louis Rouquier, complaining that at 10 pm the previous day 'une délégation importante'[56] of metalworkers, and in particular those from Hotchkiss had occupied his factory in order to support his workforce who had come out on strike that day. Clément detailed his unhappiness at this situation and the fact that he was kept up all night by the strikers in order to respond to their demands, eventually signing a 'collective agreement' contract with them. This contract

[56] Archives Municipales de Levallois. Series 8D2.

detailed twelve workers' demands similar to those that had come into force after a strike at the nearby Renault factory the previous year and included several that were comparable to those eventually incorporated into the Matignon Agreements. At the top of the list were the demands to do away with overtime, an agreement that no one should be penalised for taking strike action and that social security payments should be paid every financial quarter. The workers also obtained the right to stop work 5 minutes before the end of each shift in order to clean up, to take their meals inside the factory, immediate payments of arrears, strike pay of 20 francs per day for everyone, and a new increased pay scale. At the bottom of the list were agreements for eight days paid holiday per year, and one litre of milk per day to be given to those workers in the factory whose work took them into contact with gas.[57]

Workers throughout Levallois became increasingly confident in their own ability to force through improvements to their pay and working conditions. Ordinary shop floor workers on many occasions took the lead in these movements without waiting for the CGT to officially sanction the industrial action. For the Trotskyists, such autonomy by rank-and-file workers regardless of their affiliation to the PCF or SFIO, was welcomed and seen by them as opening up possibilities of building united fronts which would lead to independent workers' committees (*La Lutte Ouvrière* 12 June 1936).

[57] Letter from Lucien Clément to Mayor Rouquier, Archives Municipales de Levallois. Series 8D2.

The *Archives Municipales de Levallois*[58] contain several other examples of letters written to the mayor by employers complaining about the actions of their workers. The first of these letters is dated 2 June 1936 and is from the Société Tubauto where the *patron* describes the fact that the workforce had occupied the factory 'contrairement à notre volonté'. Other letters detail the affront felt by the directors and managers due to the actions of workers who were ignoring them, going beyond the normal worker and manager relationship[59] or preventing them from exercising their authority.[60] Some strikers referred to in the letters, after having occupied the factories simply threw away the keys to all the entrances and offices, as happened at the Sainte-Geneviève biscuit factory. One letter[61] describes how the workers refused to let management leave the factory until their demands were met. Most of the letters were written in the period up to the 13 June but the last letter sent to the mayor was dated 23 September 1936,[62] from the Francois-Meunier chocolate factory. Here the workers were unhappy with the delay in the discussions between the employers and unions regarding the *contrat collectif* and so had occupied the factory two days earlier. Interestingly, the letter also notes that the office workers in the factory had taken sympathy action with the shop floor workers and had simply not turned up to work. A common theme running through the letters is a demand by the employers for the mayor to send in the police in order to force the occupiers to evacuate the factories. The Hotchkiss management had written to the *Procureur de la République*[63] on the 6 June

[58] All letters referred to are collected in the Series 8D2.
[59] Letter from the Société d'outillage mécanique et industriel J.M.'
[60] Letter from the Société Industriel des Téléphones.
[61] From the director of the Parfumerie G. Lemoine.
[62] Nearly four months after the signing of the Matignon Agreements.
[63] The public prosecutor.

complaining that the workforce had gone on strike.[64] Another letter, written on the 10 June from the Société Bernardin et Fils, has the following plea from the director: 'Je vous prie de prendre les mesures nécessaires pour que les locaux soient évacués et qu'aucun dommage, pillage ou déprédation quelconque ne soient commis.'[65]

In reply, Mayor Rouquier states that this would be impossible because the local police had been converted into a *Police d'Ėtat* and were now under the direct control of the government through the Interior Ministry. He was therefore 'sorry' and could not offer any assistance. That the mayor was a former PCF member, now an Independent Socialist, and owed his position to the working class population of Levallois, may have had an influence on his decision. According to René Mouriaux, the first time that the police intervened to end an occupation after the signing of the Matignon Agreements was not until 7 October at the Chocolaterie des Gourmets in the 15th arrondissement of Paris (Mouriaux 1982, 76).

Perhaps surprisingly, given the exceptionally high level of industrial action taking place in the town, the Levallois town council only makes two references to the strikes and occupations in the minutes[66] of their monthly meeting on 12 June 1936. The first is a decision to give financial assistance of 4 francs a day to each striker who resided in Levallois. The second was to agree to the demand made by the striking municipal rubbish collectors for a pay rise of 5.50 francs per day as from the 11 June. These decisions were highly significant at the time and

[64] Archives de la Préfecture de Police de Paris. Reference BA 1874.
[65] Letter from Francois-Meunier chocolate factory to Mayor Rouqier. (23 Sept 1936).
[66] Registres des délibérations du conseil municipal. 1936. Folios 268-278.

demonstrated to the local population that the council was supportive of the strikers.

With such a high level of worker mobilisation in the area, the second meeting of the Hotchkiss committee, held in the main yard of the factory on the 11 June, brought together 587 delegates (Bertin 1936) representing strike committees from 280 workplaces, not only from Levallois, but also from the neighbouring communes of St Ouen, Clichy, St Denis and La Courneuve. Its very success was**,** one must conclude**,** an indication of the depth of mistrust that rank-and-file workers had for the official union leaderships. The Hotchkiss strike committee issued a communiqué afterwards stating that the delegates had agreed to form 'un centre autonome de la grève' (Bertin 1936) or action committee, so as to be able to co-ordinate the efforts of militants from the different workplaces. According to the report in *L'Humanité* (13 June 1936), '[t]ous les délégués ont jugé utile de former un comité d'entente entre les usines qui permettra d'envisager pour demain de nouvelles victoires.' These new victories, though not specified in the newspaper report, were more than likely envisaged to be political rather than purely economic or sectional. According to Danos and Gibelin the strike committee at the Hotchkiss factory was a new type of committee, one which was capable of opposing or even replacing the union leaderships if they did not correctly reflect and transmit the wishes and demands of rank-and-file workers. As such it was 'an organism ultimately capable of welding the workers' struggles more tightly together and giving them an added strength' (Danos & Gibelin 1986, 142). Such a committee they describe as being 'an attempt to set up a soviet-style organisation, in the original meaning of the term' (1986, 143).

Reactions to the Hotchkiss Strike Committee

Aware that they were in danger of losing the initiative and possibly even control of the strike movement, the PCF and CGT leaderships had to respond quickly. They did have the advantage of knowing that many of the newly-active militants in the factories would more than likely first look to them for direction. They therefore had to go some way towards accommodating their demands if they were not to be outflanked by groups to the left of them. To this end Maurice Thorez, the PCF General Secretary, publicly recognised and saluted the initiative taken by workers such as those in the Hotchkiss factory, but he went on to stress clearly that conditions were not yet ripe for the further development of any 'soviets' (*L'Humanité,* 13 June 1936) or the creation of a situation of dual power with the existing state apparatus. In order that there was no doubt in the minds of union activists, he further clarified his position and that of the PCF by drawing attention to his earlier, now oft-quoted speech, when he stated that '[i]l faut savoir terminer une grève dès que la satisfaction a été obtenue' (*L'Humanité*, 12 June 1936) and that '[t]out n'est pas possible' (Thorez 1936a, 785; Dreyfus 1995, 167). He thus in effect exhorted PCF militants to do just that. In this he was supported by the CGT leadership who warned the Hotchkiss committee not to substitute themselves for the recognised union apparatus (Broué & Dorey 1966, 101). They made clear that they were not prepared to allow such a committee to autonomously make decisions and thus break away from or become a substitute for the existing union apparatus. That they took this position was consistent with other positions they had taken recently. Already on the 2 June, the *Union des syndicats de la région Parisienne*, once having decided to put its weight behind the strikes and occupations, envisaged methodically taking control of the

organisation of the movement. They issued a statement making their intentions clear, calling on workers to stay calm, remain dignified, disciplined and ordered. At all costs they were to 'éviter toute exagération, enchères démagogiques et désordre dangereux' (Schwarz 1937, 74).

In effect, they issued a warning to ordinary workers and union members to not take things into their own hands; instead they should leave the running of the strikes and occupations up to the existing union apparatus. But this warning was not heeded by the strikers at the Hotchkiss factory. The leading militant and figurehead of their strike committee was a Trotskyist in the POI, Georges Chéron, who was actively supported by the two CGT shop stewards Mugnier and Thiron, both of whom had played an important role in the earlier strike on the 26 May and were members of the PCF (*L'Humanité*, 10 June 1936). Internal POI documents show that Chéron was elected to the Central Committee of the organisation at this time (POI 1936c). Along with three other members, Boitel, Margne and Legué, he was responsible for co-coordinating the trade union activities of the POI. These same documents show that Chéron was excused from attending a POI central committee meeting on the 7 June so that he could prepare for the forthcoming first meeting of the Hotchkiss committee on the 9 June. Other contemporary internal documents from the POI show clearly that their strategy during the occupations was to promote elected workshop and factory committees and then establish local workers' councils so as to be able to centralise and coordinate activities between the committees in different factories. 'Le mot d'ordre central d'agitation de la situation actuelle est le contrôle ouvrier par les comités d'entreprise'. The emphasis on building active unity was also

paramount: 'on soulignera notre volonté de maintenir le front unique de la classe ouvrière dans ses organes de masse' (POI 1936d, 3-4). Furthermore, they were also heavily involved in the creation of support groups for strikers in localities surrounding the occupied factories. In this development Chéron and his supporters were attempting to put into practice the slogans raised by the POI in their newspapers and leaflets. An article from the first edition[67] of their newspaper *La Lutte Ouvrière* exhorted militants to:

> Passez des Comités de grève aux Comités d'usine permanents……Formez vos milices ouvrières……Il faut relier les Comités entre eux, dans tout le pays. Il faut préparer le Congrès des Comités d'usines. Il faut que seuls les Comités dirigent la lutte……Il faut qu'à l'extérieur des usines tous les exploités s'organisent en Comités, que ces Comités se ramifient, entrent en liaison avec les Comités d'usine (*La Lutte Ouvrière* 12 June 1936).

The Communist-dominated leadership of the *Union des syndicats de la région Parisienne* considered that many of those who had played a role in successfully leading and organising a strike and occupation to be political adversaries. They opposed the calls for revolution, the transformation of strike committees into permanent factory committees or soviets and especially the setting up of workers' militia. The officials of the *Fédération des métaux* section of the CGT, which at that time included PCF members René Poirot and Jean Pierre Timbaud, actively campaigned against Chéron and the POI. The exact nature of this campaigning is not known, but the result was that by August, Chéron had taken the decision to leave the factory (Maitron 1984, 240). His departure effectively marked the end of the Hotchkiss workers' committee in the form it had taken

[67] A unique copy of which is kept in the CERMTRI archives in Paris.

under his leadership. Given Chéron's background as a long-time, experienced union activist, combined with the support that he had built up amongst his fellow workers, the extent of this pressure on him must have been considerable in order to have forced him to abandon his job. The POI highlighted in Levallois, 'les manœuvres perfides des responsables staliniens, qui s'efforcent de faire renvoyer des usines les meneurs trotskystes' (*La Lutte Ouvrière,* 19 September 1936, 4). In order to discourage rank-and-file workers and their own members from taking part in united fronts with Trotskyists, the PCF would mount campaigns accusing Trotskyists of being *provocateurs*, agents of the factory owners and even claiming that they were in the pay of Hitler. On occasions even physical violence was used in order to prevent Trotskyists from making contact with or influencing fellow workers (Attias 1982, 2).

The Hotchkiss committee was, unsurprisingly, celebrated on the front page of *La Lutte Ouvrière* (12 June 1936). The newspaper described how the strike committee was 'chargé de diriger, d'organiser la sécurité et l'hygiène du personnel et de l'entretien de l'usine.' The newspaper also put forward the notion of workers appropriating, taking control of and running their own factories[68]. Production and distribution of goods and services, the newspaper argued, could be determined through a network of workplace and neighbourhood workers' committees. These would be the 'higher forms of the united front' in the shape of soviets:

[68] One short-lived example of such workers' control occurred at the Delespaul-Havez biscuit and chocolate factory in the Paris suburb of Marcq-en-Baroeul. The 650 strikers not only occupied the factory but went on to threaten its total expropriation. When the water and electricity to the factory was cut off, the occupiers then distributed the perishable stocks to those families in the local town most in need of food (Broué & Dorey 1966, 101). The 'directeur de grève' (Attias 1982, 123) was a Trotskyist called de Vreger.

> Chez les métallos s'est posée avec force l'idée de faire marcher les entreprises sans les patrons. D'une manière quasi instinctive, ils coordonnent leurs Comités d'usine: l'initiative de chez Hotchkiss peut et doit donner le centre d'un nouveau pouvoir (*La Lutte Ouvrière* 12 June 1936, 1).

Attias provides evidence that Trotskyists were active in many other workplaces during the occupations but their numbers were small. Nevertheless, despite this numerical weakness he maintains that, alongside other *gauchistes* and some revolutionary syndicalists, they attempted to build united fronts and provide a focus for the more radical workers, much to the exasperation of the PCF. He details a Trotskyist presence in twenty-four communes in the suburbs, and branches in nearly all the working class *arrondissements*[69] of Paris (Attias 1982, 95). He notes there were at least twelve experienced POI members active in Levallois at the time and a Trotskyist presence in no less than fourteen different local workplaces, a higher density than in many other districts.[70] An undated internal document from the Paris regional committee of the POI detailed the organisation necessary for the further distribution and fly-posting of the 'Soviets' leaflet. In addition, it exhorted POI activists to build a network of workers' committees and councils using the designation 'Soviet'. From this it is possible to identify 11 *arrondissements* with POI branches and a further five in the suburbs. The largest branch seemed to be in the 19th *arrondissement* as they were given the most leaflets (800) to distribute. But the St Denis branch, close to the Hotchkiss factory, was considered to be crucial; 'le travail de la cellule de St

[69] Namely the 4th, 10th , 11th ,12th, 13th, 14th, 15th, 17th, 18th, 19th and 20th *arrondissements*
[70] Attias also gives details of Trotskyist implantation in thirteen large provincial cities and eight *départements*.

Denis est particulièrement important. Tout le rayon devra être mobilisé le soir du collage à St Denis pour protéger les camarades' (POI 1936e).

It is worth dwelling for a moment on the life and activism of Georges Chéron, as he was particularly important to the activities of the Hotchkiss Strike Committee and the strike more generally. He was amongst a small number of militant trade unionists such as Jean Gillot and Andre Daudenthun who had previously been active in either the PCF or SFIO before becoming Trotskyists. Chéron was born in Montargis in the Loiret Département on the last day of December 1897. He was brought up as a Catholic by working class parents. At the age of seventeen he joined the army and survived the horrors of trench warfare during the First World War. The experience of the war, combined with an awareness of the documented mutinies by French soldiers and knowledge of the events in Russia in 1917 led him, according to his daughter[71], to reject his Catholic upbringing and become a socialist. After the war he became a metalworker and, as a revolutionary syndicalist, was a well-known militant in the Paris region having played an especially active role in the widespread strikes of 1920. He, like other revolutionary syndicalists such as Pierre Monatte[72], joined the PCF soon after its formation and by 1929 had become a Central Committee member[73]. He was an activist in the town of Corbeil-Essonnes to the south of Paris and became the local CGTU secretary. By the early 1930s he had become the most well known and prominent member of the PCF in the region and was instrumental in the party winning control of the Corbeil-Essonnes municipal council. His daughter

[71] Author's interview with Mme Baudoin, 30 May 2006.
[72] Monatte joined in 1923.
[73] PCF Central Committee minutes: 3MI6/47 sequence 324 & 325, 3MI6/55 sequence 379, 3MI6/65 sequence 432-434, 3MI6/67 sequence 440-444.

recounts that it was around this time[74] that he was arrested and for a short time imprisoned for his political and trade union activities. This was the period when the PCF followed its *classe contre classe* policy. Chéron and the majority of the local PCF members had for some time opposed what they saw as the sectarian nature of this line, and argued that what was needed to counter the rise of fascism was unity of action with the socialists of the SFIO. In May 1934 at a meeting in Corbeil-Essonnes called to build such a united front, Chéron shared a platform with speakers from the SFIO and the *Ligue communiste*. By the end of 1935 Chéron had broken with the PCF and joined the Trotskyists. According to Pierre Frank the Communists had expelled him for his 'attitude oppositionnelle' (Frank 1975, 2). He was elected to the Central Committee of the PCI in May 1936 and later that same month to the leadership of the newly-formed POI.

During the occupation at the Hotchkiss factory no mention is made of armed workers' militia along the lines envisaged by Trotsky, although the factory was securely guarded and controlled by the striking workers. The agitation and interventions made by Chéron and the POI at Hotchkiss and neighbouring workplaces do, however, seem to have been chracterised by many of the components described in the previous chapter as being necessary for the building of a successful united front. In particular, the delegates who attended the second meeting called by the Hotchkiss strike committee were united around a common aim of wanting to push for more radical demands than those represented by the Matignon Agreements. It is not possible to assess the political affiliation of those attending the meeting but, given the known existing strength of the POI, it can be

[74] This could have been earlier in 1929 when during December 1,127 PC members were arrested. This was a period when the party was suffering severe repression from the French state due to its activities opposing war and French imperialism.

safely assumed that the majority were not Trotskyists. So Chéron, despite being a well-known Trotskyist, had been able to initiate and successfully build an alliance of rank-and-file union activists from a wide-range of political backgrounds and experiences, who were prepared to consider taking further action in order to bring about the 'nouvelles victoires' as suggested in the pages of *L'Humanité* (13 June 1936). That they were unable to do so was in the end undoubtedly due to the overwhelming size, influence and disciplined methods of the PCF and CGT. For a group of workers to take a contrary position which would have effectively led to a break away and isolation from these two influential mass organisations required considerable strength and confidence. The majority of workers were loyal members of the CGT as well as either the PCF or SFIO, which an alternative organisation, of at most a few hundred members, could not replace. Nevertheless, the influence and strength of the POI-led strike committee were greatest in the Levallois and Clichy factories of the Hotchkiss group and it is in these two factories that workers achieved improvements over and above those applicable through the Matignon Agreements, such as the suppression of the existing piece-rate system for a guaranteed minimum wage.[75] At the St Denis workshop, on the other hand, the factory management was able to maintain the piece-rate system (*La Lutte Ouvrière*, 11 July 1936, 4). In an analysis of the situation at Hotchkiss, the POI noted that:

> Le comité de coordination née à l'issu du conflit sur l'initiative des camarades de Levallois, doit se renforcer. Les méthodes organisationnelles, de liaison, de travail,

[75] 8fr.50 per hour.

> d'action et de préparation vers de nouvelles luttes, doivent y être étudier et appliquer (*La Lutte Ouvrière* 11 July 1936, 4).*

This would, the article continued, necessitate 'le renforcement des sections syndicales d'usines, le maintien de comités d'usine' and 'la formation de cadres nouveaux' (*La Lutte Ouvrière*, 11 July 1936, 4).

As can be imagined, the strikes and occupation of the Hotchkiss factory caused widespread consternation amongst the owners of the company. Evidence of this comes from the annual meeting and report to the Hotchkiss shareholders held in May of 1937. The report states that: '[i]l est inutile de discuter ici en détail l'influence des ces accords [Matignon] sur notre activité, sur nos prix de revient et sur la diminution de rendement du travail' (SAAEH 1937, 4). The report goes on to blame the 'grèves persistantes' (SAAEH 1937, 10) for a reduction in profits[76] in 1936, resulting in particular from the requirement to accord holiday pay and the reduction of the working week to 40 hours. But 'l'acte le plus grave' cited in the report, was 'la nationalisation de vos usines d'armes' effective from 15 December. After this date, only non-military production would be left in the hands of the shareholders.

The attempt at Hotchkiss to establish a 'soviet-style organisation' was not developed any further, nor was it successfully copied by any other strikers. Elsewhere factory committees did not autonomously link up with each other as was the case at Hotchkiss. The POI continued to call for their formation, and

* Grammatical errors occur in the original document.
[76] Although the shareholder dividend was the same as in 1935.

even for a national congress of workers, peasants and soldiers committees, as shown in an internal bulletin from the end of June:

> La lutte pour le pouvoir c'est la lutte pour les Soviets. Notre mot d'ordre central « Les Soviets en France ». Il existe déjà les embryons de Soviets: les Comités de grève (POI 1936f, 3).

Daniel Guérin describes how he and *la Gauche révolutionnaire*, a prominent left-wing faction within the SFIO which at times collaborated closely with the Trotskyists, did not appreciate until eighteen months later the need to create federations of factory committees and workers' councils as proposed by the Trotskyists (Guérin 1976, 132). The *Gauche révolutionnaire* did tend to vacillate between reformist and revolutionary positions. Its leader, Marceau Pivert, had for example, written an article in the journal *Populaire* on the 27 May 1936, stating that 'tout était possible'[77], but this was later compromised to some extent when he accepted a non-ministerial post in the Blum government with responsibility for SFIO propaganda. Throughout the strikes *la Gauche révolutionnaire* continued to respect the trade union orthodoxy of vertical, hierarchical organisations, never once attempting to counter-pose them to the soviet model or other alternative structures. Although Guérin does make the point, that in his capacity as a local CGT organiser in the Paris suburb of *les Lilas*, with an authorised office in the town hall, he and other rank-and-file trade unionists had been able to create what he termed a 'petit soviet'. The office was the organising hub for dozens of local workplaces on strike. It acted as the CGT recruiting office, supplied negotiators to intercede with management, co-ordinated workers

[77] It was partly in response to this article that Thorez later countered with '[t]out n'est pas possible'.

occupying factories, maintained security and even ensured that everyone had enough food and drink supplies. For a short period of time the soviet became a power base of at least equal importance, if not greater, than the official political establishment in the local community:

> Avons-nous pleine conscience de la force qui est la nôtre? La petite bourgeoisie est neutralisée ou acquise. Les politiciens tremblent. Les fascistes se sont terrés comme par enchantement. Les autorités sont à nos pieds. Un nouveau pouvoir s'ébauche. Une révolution commence (Guérin 1976, 203).

After the 13 June 1936 article in *L'Humanité*, there were no further reports or public acknowledgements by the PCF,[78] neither about the Hotchkiss strike committee, nor of the role played in it by Georges Chéron who, after leaving the factory in August, went to fight against Franco in Spain.[79] Whether his departure was entirely due to the difficulties he faced from the PCF in carrying out his role, or determined by what he saw as his duties as an international revolutionary is not known. The Hotchkiss workers did however, in August, after a factory-wide vote, send machine guns made in the factory to anti-Franco fighters and in the first week of September they held a thirty minute strike in solidarity with them (Schweitzer 1978, 113). June 1936 though, was the peak of militancy and radicalism.

[78] Although, at his funeral at Saintry-sur-Seine in October 1975, the local PCF mayor M. Clément praised Chéron and spoke affectionately of him and their common struggles together during the early days of the Communist Party.
[79]He joined the *Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista* (POUM).

Evaluation

In the following section of this chapter I will proceed to evaluate the effectiveness of attempts by Trotskyists to build united fronts during the 1930s, focusing in particular on the Hotchkiss Strike Committee. This particular attempt at using the united front tactic was not the only time that Trotskyists had been involved in establishing alliances of workers inside the French trade union movement during the 1930s. Therefore, in order to better evaluate the success or otherwise of Chéron and the POI in the Hotchkiss Strike Committee, I will briefly mention and compare two other examples.

The first occurred shortly after the formation in 1930 of the *Ligue communiste*, when Trotskyists took part in the *Opposition unitaire* (OU). Initiated by Alfred Rosmer[80] and Maurice Dommanget,[81] this was an attempt to reassert the tradition of rank-and-file autonomy inside the CGTU[82] affiliated unions and to bring together those activists who were prepared to question the dominance of the PCF. Furthermore, Rosmer in particular considered the OU to be a practical means through which the *Ligue communiste* could bring its criticisms of the PCF and the CGTU leadership to a wider audience than previously. 'La liaison avec l'Opposition Unitaire est la première tentative faite par les trotskyistes français pour sortir de leur isolement et s'insérer réellement dans le mouvement ouvrier' (Hirsch 1974, 47). In doing so, he maintained it could offer a political alternative

[80] Rosmer came from the revolutionary syndicalist tradition and was a founder member of the PCF in 1920.
[81] Dommanget, a teachers' union leader, was never a member of the *Ligue Communiste* but was an anti-Stalinist and supporter of Trotsky at this time. He resigned from the PCF and later became a prolific author of works relating to the French workers' movement.
[82] The trade unions at this time were still divided between the PCF dominated confederation CGTU (*unitaires*) and the SFIO dominated CGT (*confédérés*).

to both the PCF and *La Ligue syndicaliste*.[83] But despite some initial successes in co-coordinating the actions of grass-roots militants, the OU project did not receive widespread support from Trotskyists and was beset by problems from the outset, many of which were as a result of internal divisions amongst the Trotskyists themselves. The OU was highly selective and limited in scope compared to later attempts at building united fronts. Both it and the *Ligue communiste* took what could be considered to be an extremely sectarian position. They effectively ignored workers belonging to the CGT at this time, denigrating its leaders and a large part of its membership as hopelessly and implacably reformist. They devoted their energies instead towards recruiting rank-and-file activists in the CGTU, concerning themselves in the main with those they considered to be potentially receptive to revolutionary ideas, such as workers sympathetic to the ideas of the Left Opposition. The OU thus became in practice more of a narrow alliance limited to those in the CGTU who were opposed to the supporters of Stalin within the leadership of the confederation. But even amongst this potentially revolutionary minority, strategic differences of opinion in relation to the nature and purpose of the OU persisted between the syndicalist and Trotskyist components of the alliance and were to lead to its eventual demise.

The second further example to note is the *Cercle syndicaliste lutte de classe,* established during 1937 and continuing until July 1939. Trotskyists[84] played an

[83] Established by anti-Communist revolutionary syndicalists, *La Ligue syndicaliste* in 1930 attempted to carry out united work with militants from both the CGTU and the CGT union confederations with the intention of reuniting the two bodies through a joint formation, which also included anarchists, known as *le Comité des 22.*

[84] In the immediate aftermath of the strikes of June 1936 the French Trotskyist movement went into a period of animosity and fragmentation. The differences of opinion amongst them in the autumn of 1936 mirrored and were a continuation of those between the GBL and PCI in existence prior to the events of the summer. It was these two groupings that were to separate again in August 1936 after the supporters of Molinier and Frank had been threatened with expulsion from

important role in the *Cercle syndicaliste lutte de classe*, but it was led by a dissident PCF member, Gustave Galopin.[85] The stimulus for its formation came from the apparent unwillingness of the PCF and CGT leaderships to support workers in defence of the gains made in June 1936. These had, since their inception, consistently been under attack from the employers and elements of the Popular Front government. According to Jackson (1988, 240), for a short time this created opportunities again for revolutionaries from the far left to agitate amongst reformists and others inside the trade unions. He maintains that they were able to play an even greater role in this period than in 1936.[86] Indeed, Georges Chéron, having returned from Spain in late 1937 and taking up again his position as a Central Committee member of the PCI, attempted with other metalworkers in the party to set up a congress of factory delegates based on the Hotchkiss model. But in reality there were few real opportunities for revolutionaries to build such a congress, and so the plan did not progress beyond initial meetings with a few individuals. As a result, competing factions had sprung up inside the CGT, all of which were critical of the CGT leaderships'

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the POI, a position opposed by Chéron (POI 1936h). They reformed the *Parti communiste internationaliste* (PCI) and began to publish a newspaper, *La Commune.* Those that remained preserved the name *Parti ouvrier internationaliste* and published *La Vérité*, the newspaper originally founded by the combined 'left opposition' in 1929 and later becoming that of the *Ligue communiste*. Over the next two years the combined membership of the two Trotskyist parties fell and did not even reach half the figure that they had achieved as a single organisation in the months preceding June 1936. The animosities between the two parties were so great that, for example, in the Saint-Denis elections of May 1937, which eventually removed as mayor the former PCF member turned fascist leader of the *Parti populaire français* (PPF) Jacques Doriot, they arguably put more effort into accusing each other of Stalinism than they did in opposing any of the other parties. As a result, they rapidly lost credibility and were not seen by workers as viable alternatives to the other parties of the left. Such actions simply compounded the condemnation of them by the PCF and SFIO.

[85] Galopin had previously been the official leader of the PCF youth section and was thus a well-known activist.

[86] Indeed, in the Renault factory for example, the revolutionary left shop stewards provided a major challenge to the hegemony of the PCF within the CGT and were influential enough to be able to organise strike action in autumn 1937 against the collusion of the Renault management with fascist parties (PPF and PSF). Six months later they were also able to initiate strikes, without official CGT support, against the imposition of speed-ups, wage cuts and the rising accident rate in the factory (Magraw 1992, 286).

response to the attacks. Galopin led the most left-wing of these, the *Lutte de classe* committee, who were organised around the newspaper *le Réveil syndicaliste.* The *Cercle,* as the faction eventually became known, was established at the start of 1937 and attempted to appeal to the 'revolutionary' components of the CGT, essentially those who had previously been in the CGTU. The *Cercle* brought together not only dissident former Communists such as Galopin, but also Trotskyists from the POI and PCI, anarchists and supporters of Marceau Pivert,[87] with the intention of uniting and organising militant rank-and-file trade unionists around a revolutionary position, in a similar way to that attempted by the *Opposition unitaire* earlier in the decade. Its manifesto called for the defence and extension of the social gains made in 1936, the establishment of workers' control and the immediate nationalisation without compensation of key industries. In order to achieve its aims, the *Cercle* emphasised the importance of independent rank-and-file workers' self-organisation and the need for class struggle in the workplace. Unions, it maintained, should be led by the rank and file and furthermore, minority tendencies should be represented at all levels of the union apparatus from 'la base au sommet.'[88] The *Cercle* was significantly different from previous attempts to create revolutionary groupings within the CGT such as the OU, in that it was created by more experienced rank-and-file trades unionists and was prepared to accept a variety of political tendencies which, without hiding their political origins, had nevertheless agreed

[87] Pivert, as noted earlier, was the leader of a left-wing tendency inside the SFIO known as the *Gauche révolutionnaire*. He had unsuccessfully tried to move the SFIO to the left. His criticisms of the SFIO and Blum's policy of 'national union' were so great that during the SFIO conference in Royan in June 1938 he was accused of 'indiscipline' and expelled. He went on to establish his own party, *'le Parti socialiste ouvrier et paysan'* (PSOP) with the aim of attracting a significant number of dissident SFIO members. But instead of attracting a predicted 20,000 SFIO members as it had hoped, the new party never managed to attract more than 6000 adherents (Birchall 1981, 83).

[88] From a tract published in the weekly newspaper of the PCI, *La Commune* on 5 February 1937 (Broué & Dorey 1966, 131).

that the best way forward was to work in alliance with each other. While to some extent still part of the syndicalist tradition, its members could be both militant trade unionists and openly political revolutionaries. Galopin, nevertheless, argued determinedly to preserve the independence of the *Cercle* from being taken over by any one political tendency, not because he was opposed to politics within the union, but because he was concerned to ensure that efficient interventions in day-to-day trade union struggles by the *Cercle* were not jeopardised by political wrangling. Fraternal discussions and divergences, though on occasions heated, were able to take place amongst the different components of the *Cercle* without leading to any permanent fragmentation. Indeed, they became a hallmark of the faction. Through the setting up of workplace supporters groups and organising meetings in factories, the *Cercle* was eventually able to gain an indisputable base for itself and have some influence in the metallurgical, engineering and building industries. Indeed, it played an active role providing an alternative to the PCF during the metalworkers' strikes in March 1938 (*La Révolution Prolétarienne* 1938, March/April). Its newspaper, *Le Réveil syndicaliste* had, according to one estimate, a circulation of at least 5000 (Kergoat 1986, 274). In June 1938, school teachers from the *École Émancipée* tendency joined forces with the *Cercle* and together were able to create for the first time a significant and united minority left-wing faction inside the CGT. 'Le Cercle Lutte de Classes est un véritable front unique des minorités révolutionnaires sur le plan syndical' (Broué & Dorey 1966, 132).[89]

[89] By the time of the 31st Congress of the CGT at Nantes in November 1938 there were three other factions inside the CGT whose combined support ensured that delegates from the *Cercle* were unable to significantly influence the final decisions made. These factions were the supporters of the pacifist, anti-communist René Belin, the majority of the *unitaires*, that is, the PCF (who had the possible support of around 50 per cent of the delegates), and the leadership current around Léon Jouhaux.

The above two illustrations, alongside that of the Hotchkiss Strike Committee, though different from each other in detail, illustrate how Trotskyists had a common objective in wanting to apply the tactic of the united front. Moreover, they all reiterated the idea that radical change for the benefit of the working class could only be brought about through a form of class struggle which promoted autonomous rank-and-file organisation not constrained by the dominant trade union leaders and hierarchies. The differences between the three examples had resulted from interpretations of the united front tactic which had been determined, in the view of the Trotskyist union activists at the heart of each one, 'by the dialectics of the class struggle' (Trotsky 1933). But of the three, only the Hotchkiss strike committee, attempted to unite militants from differing political persuasions in a convincing fashion. Furthermore, it was the only one which raised demands posing the possibility of alternatives to the existing social and economic order, although these were not outlined in detail. The OU and *Cercle* concerned themselves for the most part with longer term organisational questions which attempted to establish significant left-wing factions within trade unions. In doing so, they focused their campaigning amongst those union members whom they considered to have already rejected reformism and be receptive to revolutionary socialist ideas. The OU in particular disregarded those it characterised as reformists. Despite its limited target audience the *Cercle* did nevertheless have an impact and influence upon a wider diversity of workers than just their immediate 'revolutionary' supporters. Certainly no other Trotskyist-backed faction of the CGT had ever had as many Congress delegates as did the *Cercle* in 1938 (Rabaut 1974, 295). Many of these were highly experienced trade unionists with a greater understanding and knowledge than previous activists of

the need for unity between the most militant sections of the trade union movement. How many of them would have then gone on to fully embrace revolutionary Trotskyism cannot be assessed.

The Hotchkiss strike committee on the other hand, did not limit itself to those already sympathetic to revolutionary ideas. From the outset, it made a concerted effort to bring together all workers in an attempt to create an alternative type of workers' organisation: whether they were members of the PCF, SFIO or anarchists, whether they were already union members or not. The situation Chéron and the POI faced was significantly different to that faced by the OU or the *Cercle* in that the Hotchkiss committee was created during a short period of nationwide industrial action. This involved mass mobilisations of workers, strikes and workplace occupations, which at times set workers against their employers in what could be considered by some, to be overt expressions of class struggle. These mobilisations represented a widespread desire for significant social change by workers. They were accompanied by a strength of feeling and preparedness to take action autonomously, which initially took the leadership of the established workers' organisations by surprise, and thus enabled a Trotskyist union activist like Chéron to take advantage of the situation. The POI however, envisaged more than just agitating for reforms to the established economic order**.** They saw the wave of strikes and rise in militancy as an opportunity which could provide a revolutionary contest to the power of the '200 families' and the overthrow of capitalism itself.

Trotsky suggested in June 1936 that '[t]he choice lies between the greatest of all historical victories and the most ghastly of defeats' (Trotsky 1974, 136). He went so far as to suggest that the strikes and occupations were in his view the 'classic beginning of a revolution' (1974, 133). To achieve this however, it would be necessary to build united fronts with other workers' organisations and from this create an alternative system of power through the national co-ordination of workers' councils: a Congress of soviets. Aware of the fact that his supporters were thin on the ground and that they would face immense difficulties attempting to influence events, he was nevertheless, optimistic that they could make contact with the new militants and strike leaders thrown up by the occupations. In doing so, the task would then be to win them over to a revolutionary perspective, thus transforming the POI into a mass revolutionary party. The first step was to encourage the self-organisation of workers, create united fronts in the form of rank-and-file strike committees and then begin to establish autonomous soviets in workplaces and neighbourhoods.

The attempt by Chéron and the POI at unifying workers, not only in the Hotchkiss factory but in the surrounding area, was also distinguished by a united front characteristic missing from the OU or the *Cercle*, that of having a set of clear unifying aims over the short and mid-terms. These linked immediate economic and social demands with others which went further than those of the Matignon Agreements advocated by the union leaderships. The short-term demands were able in the circumstances to unify workers of differing political backgrounds in the factory. The subsequent proposals and demands for further victories as agreed by delegates at the meeting on the 11 June are likely to have

included calls similar to those published by the POI, such as for the extension of soviets and for the setting up of a national Congress of factory committees. In contrast, the OU had aims of a more long term and vague nature which called for an alternative form of trade union structure, much of it couched in overtly anti-PCF language, which would have only been immediately attractive to those workers already convinced by the arguments of revolutionary syndicalists and Trotskyists belonging to the *Ligue communiste*. Similarly, although to a lesser extent, the *Cercle*, while calling for the defence and extension of gains made in June 1936 and opposition to Government war preparations, made its appeal essentially to those who were already sympathetic to revolutionary ideas. On the other hand, it did at times, make reference to demands for the establishment of workers' control and the nationalisation without compensation of various industries, both of which could have been attractive to non-revolutionaries. But a distinguishing feature of both OU and the *Cercle* is that they were established at times of downturn in industrial action and relative demoralisation of the workers' movement. Thus their demands and search for united forms of action were more often than not defensive in nature, aiming to preserve already acquired rights and working conditions, while those of the Hotchkiss workers did to some extent attempt to advance improvements and propose alternatives to existing social conditions.

The very spontaneity of the strike movement in 1936, essentially organised and led from the factory floor in its initial phases, meant that there were no doubt

opportunities for the non-PCF[90] left to play a more significant role than had been previously been available to them; a situation that Chéron and the POI attempted to exploit. But their attempts to influence the direction of the strikes and take them further than was acceptable to the established unions were ultimately hampered by their numerical inferiority. 'Si elles (les masses ouvrières) n'y sont pas parvenues, c'est sans doute en partie parce qu'aucune organisation n'a canalisé leur potentiel d'énergie, contrairement à ce qu'espérait Trotski lui-même' (Lefranc 1974, 137). The POI could not by any measure be considered to be a mass organisation, numbering as they did only a few hundred, and their calls to form united fronts could, without difficulty, be ignored by the leaderships of the mass trade unions and workers' political parties. Consequently, they saw no other option other than to focus their interventions on promoting rank-and-file activity, democratic organisation and the building of alliances from the bottom up amongst grass-roots workers. Such a perspective they maintained was in line with that of the *Theses of the United Front* as adopted by the Comintern in 1922. This was, in their view, in marked contrast to that followed by the PCF who, they argued, had abandoned any overt commitment to revolutionary politics by building and participating in coalitions open to the middle classes or *petite bourgeoisie* as well as workers. This was, according to Trotsky and his followers, the underlying feature of the Popular Front.

Is it therefore possible to determine whether the tactic of the united front was successful in the case of the Hotchkiss strike? To come to a conclusion about this

[90]Other groups included revolutionary syndicalists grouped around Pierre Monatte and his newspaper *la Révolution Prolétarienne,* dissident PCF members in the *Que Faire* group led by Georges Kagan and PCF Central Committee member André Ferrat and followers of Marceau Pivert and his left-wing tendency *Gauche révolutionnaire* inside the SFIO.

it is necessary to make an assessment over both the short and longer term. Over the short term, during the few weeks of its existence, the Hotchkiss strike committee was indeed successful in that it brought together rank-and-file workers of differing political tendencies and enabled them to agitate, take control and organise together around a set of commonly agreed aims. Some of these aims were decidedly more radical than those proposed by the PCF and SFIO. For the most part the aims, related to pay and working conditions, were achieved. Furthermore, the Committee was able to cut across sectional and union divisions and incorporate workers from a range of industries. In doing so, it immediately began to pose challenges and be seen as an alternative to the existing workers' organisations. In addition, it also began to raise issues which questioned the existing social, economic and political order, about which the PCF, SFIO and CGT had refrained from doing. Demands such as equal pay for women, young people and immigrants, retirement for all at the age of 55, a drastic reduction in the arms budget, taxing the rich and the full nationalisation without compensation of public services and the largest enterprises (POI 1936i, 12) came about due to the influence and interventions of Trotskyists from the POI. The existing workers' organisations, due in no small part to their numerical superiority, were able eventually to successfully combat these challenges, which the leaderships saw as divisive and a threat to their position and status. The Trotskyists, despite not having been able to successfully build a mass revolutionary party through their united front work, were nevertheless, taken seriously and obliged their opponents to engage in concerted efforts in order to counter their ideas and proposals.

Over the long term, one aim for Trotskyists when using the united front tactic is to contribute to the bringing about of a socialist revolution. This was clearly not achieved in 1936 and so it may be argued that the united front tactic had failed. However, I would contend that it is more reasonable to argue in this case that success could be determined by an assessment of the level of political influence achieved by the Trotskyists over the longer term. In the short term, this could be measured by recruitment to the party in question. In the circumstances of the time, even if only modest recruitment was achieved then the tactic could be considered to have been in some way successful. But as was noted earlier in this chapter, the Trotskyist movement experienced splits and divisions very soon after the end of the strikes in the summer of 1936, and as a consequence was unable to maintain any significant growth. Indeed, within two years of the establishment of the Popular Front government the whole of the French workers' movement suffered a prolonged period of decline. The memberships of the SFIO, PCF and CGT all decreased as workers increasingly lost the confidence needed to take part in industrial disputes, a feature which was particularly pronounced after the failed General Strike of November 1938 (Bourdé 1977, 250), and consequent separation again of the CGT into two rival federations. These setbacks were compounded in the following period by the physical annihilation of many activists during the Nazi occupation of France.

The political influence of Trotskyists over the longer term, as we will see later, was and is dependent upon many other factors besides that of numerical size and growth. The general social, economic and political climate is undoubtedly an important factor which can have a determining effect upon the attitudes and

activism of individuals. When circumstances enabled determined and experienced Trotskyist militants like Chéron and others from the POI to intervene in workplaces and trade unions, as in the Hotchkiss factory, contesting what they deemed to be the reformist and over-conciliatory positions taken by the PCF, SFIO and leaderships of the CGT, they were able also to pose alternatives and raise the possibility of a more radical vision of a future society. It is therefore, highly probable that at some point many workers involved in the Hotchkiss strike committee engaged in debates regarding the purpose and use of the united front tactic, although conclusive evidence pointing in one direction or another is lacking. But such involvement does not necessarily mean that individuals automatically and permanently reject previously held 'reformist' ideas and the belief in the possibility of change through parliamentary means. As Marx noted, 'in revolutionary activity the changing of oneself coincides with the changing of circumstances' (Marx 1845). During and immediately after the strikes of 1936, circumstances were such that Trotskyists at the Hotchkiss factory were able successfully to bring together into militant trade union activity rank-and-file workers in a manner most had not previously experienced. In doing so they were for a short time exposed to revolutionary ideas, debate and practice which for some will have influenced their subsequent activity and involvement in the workers' movement.

Throughout the period considered in this chapter, Trotskyists comprised only small minorities amongst trade union activists and the working class in general. Their attempts at building united fronts were consequently of a limited scale and militants were unable to surmount the size, strength and near hegemony of the

PCF within the workers' movement. So while overtures were made by Trotskyists to work with the leaderships of the PCF and SFIO these were at best ignored and indeed in most cases actively opposed by them. On the other hand, the Trotskyist-led Hotchkiss Strike Committee was able to mobilise and influence a small but significant section of rank-and-file workers and trade unionists, successfully convincing them to take part in united activity. From the point of view therefore of the Trotskyists, the use of the united front tactic over the short term can be considered to have been successful. Over the longer term the results are more open to debate, indeed the Trotskyist parties were destined to remain small, much criticised and marginalised[91] within the workers' movement. However, in the immediate post-war period, as I demonstrate in the next chapter, they experienced a short-lived resurgence and through the use of the united front tactic were able to again have an effect within some sections of the French workers' movement out of all proportion to their numerical size.

[91]According to one writer this marginalisation was only to be finally really shaken off in the 1990s (Lanuque 2000).

Chapter Four

1944 -1948: the united front at Caudron and Renault

The preceding chapter examined different attempts by Trotskyist trade unionists to apply the united front tactic during the 1930s. Of the three noted, only that at the Hotchkiss factory during the strikes and occupations in June 1936 resulted in a sustained attempt to build, in a workplace, an alternative which challenged the PCF-dominated trade union structures in place at the time. During this period the Trotskyists, albeit always outnumbered and often facing hostility from members of the PCF, had been able to find a receptive audience for their views from amongst some sections of militant trade unionists. The events of World War Two and the occupation of France by the Nazis profoundly changed this situation, altering the composition and the balance of forces within the workers' movement, both nationally and within individual places of work. While the different Trotskyist groups were active and did survive the Occupation[92] – the POI for example, produced and distributed 72 clandestine editions of *La Vérité* (Chauvin 2006, 232) – it was at great cost. Fifty percent[93] of the POI membership had been killed (Kesler 1978, 748) and this had an important bearing upon how they were able to agitate and intervene in the immediate post-Occupation period. The PCF, on the other hand, despite having lost many members at the hands of the Nazis, emerged with a virtually intact and almost fully functioning national structure and network of activists. Furthermore, having been the most active and determined component of the Resistance as a whole from the summer of 1941, and indeed having suffered the greatest number of casualties, its prestige and

[92] For an examination into how they were able to do this see Birchall (1988), Chauvin (2006), Craipeau (1971) and Dazy (1981).
[93] Equating to 150 people.

reputation were enhanced such that by September 1944 it was the foremost single political party in France.

This chapter examines how the Trotskyists, numbering at the most a few hundred[94], responded to the post-war situation and in doing so adapted the united front tactic to the changed circumstances. Using case studies in two different factories and referring to archive material, I explain and evaluate how the tactic was applied by members of two distinct Trotskyist organisations, the *Parti communiste internationaliste* (PCI)[95] and the *Union communiste* (UC).

In order to put these developments in their context it is necessary to begin with a brief examination of the workers' committees[96] which had sprung up throughout France during and immediately after the Liberation. Trotskyists from the PCI in particular saw the foundation of these workers' committees as an opportunity which would once again make it possible for them to pursue their policy of building workplace united fronts, known as *fronts ouvriers* (*La Vérité*, 2 May 1944). Considering 1944 to be 'l'année de toutes les espérances' (Malaise 2001, 7), their involvement in workers' struggles at this time was seen as a first step towards transforming the end of what they termed the 'imperialist war' into a revolutionary civil war, which would enable workers to take power through the means of a socialist revolution. With this aim in mind, the leadership of the PCI wrote an 'open letter' on the 19 August to the SFIO and PCF proposing, despite

[94] Kesler estimates a maximum of 500 (1978, 749), 200 according to Lequenne (1998, 96).
[95] In February 1944 three [the *Parti ouvrier internationaliste* (POI), the *Comité communiste internationaliste* (CCI) and the *Groupe octobre*] of the four Trotskysist groups remaining in France agreed to regroup into a single organisation the PCI. The fourth group *Union communiste* (the forerunner of the present-day *Lutte ouvrière*) remained apart and has done so ever since.
[96] For a detailed analysis of this phenomenon see Steinhouse (2001).

their differences, that a united front be established between them: '[n]ous croyons possible et souhaitable la constitution d'un Front Unique de tous les Partis et toutes les organisations qui se réclament de la classe ouvrière'. The letter made reference to how militants from all three organisations during the preceding period had found themselves:

> côte à côte dans les usines pour lutter contre la terreur fasciste, contre la déportation des travailleurs en Allemagne, contre les mesures anti-sociales de Vichy, contre les prétentions des bourgeoisies françaises et allemandes d'exploiter plus férocement les masses laborieuses de ce pays, déjà épuisées par le régime de guerre, les privatisations et les bombardements (*La Vérité*, 21 August 1944).

Noting the official recognition eventually given to the different workers' committees by the Provisional Government I focus, in the following section of the chapter, on that of the Caudron aeronautical factory at Issy-les-Moulineaux. Using both primary and secondary sources I examine how, in the four years from September 1944, PCI militants using the united front tactic agitated within the *comité d'entreprise* at the factory. I follow this with an assessment of the outcomes resulting from their interventions. The next section of the chapter relates to the period after 1946 when workers began to question and contest the economic austerity measures and the drive to increase production, which had been imposed upon them as the government attempted to rebuild the French economy. One consequence of this discontent was a period of industrial unrest and a major strike in the springtime of 1947 at the Renault factory in the Paris suburb of Boulogne-Billancourt. Trotskyists, belonging to both the UC and PCI, played a significant part in this strike and were able, for a time, to find a

receptive audience for their ideas. This provides the focus for the second case study in this chapter. I examine the role of both organisations during this industrial action, but focus principally on the role of the UC and the noteworthy role it played in building a united front which enabled it to lead and coordinate the events during the early stages of the strike. Finally, I highlight common features between the two case studies and consider, according to the criteria set out in Chapter Two, whether they were successful or not and evaluate the efficacy of the united front tactic used at both Caudron and Renault.

Workplace workers' committees

In February 1945, the post-war French Provisional Government passed a law which recognised the right of workers to be represented in factory or workplace committees. Initially, this was limited to workplaces with 100 or more employees but after the elections to the Constituent Assembly of a left-wing majority and the departure of de Gaulle as head of the Provisional Government in May 1946, it was extended to include workplaces with over 50 employees. The legitimisation was the result of an enquiry and subsequent report, produced for the Provisional Government in the autumn of 1944, into the widespread occurrence of workers' councils which had sprung up throughout the country during and after the beginning of the Liberation. It had been the concerns of de Gaulle and the *patronat* about the development of these committees, envisaging a possible 'glissement vers la dépossession des chefs d'entreprises' (Perriaux 1983, 3) and consequent increased power and influence of the PCF and CGT,[97] which

[97] In April 1943 on the instigation of the PCF, the CGT reunited the *confédérés* and the *unitaires* back into one organisation through an agreement known as the *Accords du Perreux*. During the Nazi Occupation it had operated illegally with PCF members increasingly the most determined and well organised activists within the trade unions.

led to the enquiry being commissioned. However, needing their co-operation for the rebuilding of the economy, de Gaulle was very careful not to alienate the unions and reaffirmed their right to organise in workplaces At the same time, he made it plain that he would not permit workers to unilaterally dispossess owners and take over the running of factories without any central legal control by the Government (Perriaux 1983, 3).

The enquiry identified three main forms of *comités d'entreprise.* The first of these, Patriotic Works Committees, were established more often than not by bodies linked to *Résistance* or 'patriotic' organisations and had a mainly consultative role. The second form of committee noted were the Production Committees, which were especially prevalent in the aeronautic and related industries. As the name suggests, they were concerned with organising the production of goods, but also played a role in dealing with personnel issues. The third type noted were Control Committees, often set up by the *Comités départementales de la libération* (CDL). These had a more direct role in the management and running of workplaces and often arose after the disappearance or arrest of former collaborationist managers. The report did note also, that a significant number of the committees inspired by the CDL or local 'purge committees' were attempting to move towards complete workers' control of an industry or particular workplace, although it stated that only in a few cases could they be qualified as 'menaces de soviétisation à chaud' (Perriaux 1983, 3). The legislation had the full approval of the CGT who were keen to demonstrate that the unions 'ne demandaient pas d'autres modes d'association à la gestion e.g. le contrôle ouvrier ou la cogestion' (Perriaux 1983, 10). The official workplace

committees for the most part did not question the ownership of factories or industries but they did demand a say in the running of workplaces. Although, Andrieu (1987, 65) maintains that if what he terms the appropriate political organisation had been in place, then the further development of these workers' committees and councils could have begun to contest the existing social order or even capitalism itself. Where conflicts did arise, it was invariably over whether workers' committees should be limited to a purely consultative role or whether workers' representatives should by right be part of the administration and management of workplaces. The level of the actual autonomous control by workers of their factories varied enormously, with much depending upon local circumstances, the type of goods produced and the extent to which factory managers had been actively involved in collaborating with the Nazis.[98] Where managers had openly supported and worked for them, the most common scenario was for workers to down tools, seizing control of the workplace and establishing a workers' committee. The concerns of many such workers' committees were initially confined to the purging of anyone suspected of having collaborated. The eventual nature of the workers' committees and councils was in many cases determined by the extent of the political radicalism of the associated workers' representatives and leaders. This was particularly so if the CGT had been able to maintain a semblance of organisation throughout the Occupation. Prost (Andrieu 1987) argues that there was certainly a widespread willingness by workers to create councils and through them take over the running of their workplaces. At least 10 metallurgical factories in the Paris region were occupied by workers in the time between the departure of the German troops and the arrival of the Allies

[98] And therefore may had taken flight from the factory as the Liberation forces approached.

(Erouville 2004, 89). In the north western suburbs of Paris, an inter-factory committee was established which brought together delegates from 40 workplaces and also established a committee to co-ordinate the actions of the different workers' militia (Erouville 2004, 49).

The Caudron Workers' Committee

Such was the case in the Caudron aircraft factory in the Paris suburb of Issy-les-Moulineaux. Caudron was part of the Renault group and by early September 1944 the workers' committee, after having purged 60 people from the factory, including the wartime manager Asselot, had not only nominated a new manager but also then attempted to run the factory as a workers' co-operative. This was carried out without any significant assistance from the CGT, the PCF or from Charles Tillon, the PCF Minister responsible for the aircraft industry.

> De mars 1944 à février 1948, Caudron, la grande usine d'aviation d'Issy-les-Moulineaux, fut le théâtre de combats difficiles contre les patrons, puis contre l'Etat-patron et, simultanément, contre le stalinisme, qui régnait alors sur le mouvement ouvrier. Les salariés y mirent en route la première expérience d'autogestion d'entreprise en France (*Le Monde diplomatique* January 1998).

The workers' committees at both the Boulogne-Billancourt Renault factory and that of Caudron were particularly well organised and were at the forefront of the movement leading to the occupation of factories during the Liberation period. 'Dès la Libération, les salariés [chez Caudron] décidèrent d'occuper leur lieu de travail et exigèrent le contrôle ouvrier sur la gestion de l'entreprise' (*Le Monde*, 12 December 2005). Individual Trotskyist militants played a role alongside PCF

and SFIO members in the establishment of the workers' committees in both of these factories, although the extent to which they played leadership roles is not entirely clear. Simonne Minguet, a PCI militant, in a first-hand account (Minguet 1997) of her time as a fitter and shop steward in the Caudron factory, suggests that initially, apart from herself, she knew of only another two confirmed members of the PCI inside the Renault group of factories. There may have been more but, because of a national policy decision taken to remain as a clandestine group and to not organise openly inside the factories, it was difficult for them to openly coordinate their interventions and subsequently attract other union members to their political position. This stance was particularly supported by those members of the PCI such as Minguet coming from the ex-CCI. Other components of the PCI considered it to be a major disadvantage for them (Chauvin 2006, 232), and that it continued to be so until the springtime of 1945 when they again began to agitate openly.

The Caudron committee supported the call by the CGT leadership on the 18 August 1944 for a general strike. Four days later, in an article by Benoît Frachon published in *L'Humanité* (22 August 1944), the CGT called upon Parisian workers to leave their factories, arm themselves and join the street fighting on the barricades in central Paris. Armed insurrection[99] seemed for a short time to be a distinct possibility when, during what became known as *la semaine insurrectionnelle parisienne*, workers, including those at Caudron, responded to this call by creating workplace militia. In order to develop support from amongst the more radical components of their working class base, the CGT leadership

[99] According to one writer (Bell 1996) de Gaulle thought that the PCF had 25,000 armed militants in Paris. Fear by the French military command of an armed uprising and another 'Commune de Paris' (Minguet 1997, 23) led de Gaulle to order the stopping of weapons destined for the Resistance movement being parachuted into the Paris region.

argued for a greater role to be given to CGT shop stewards and local officials in the running of workplaces. They called for the nationalisation of key industries but they did not go further and demand the overthrow of capitalism as a prerequisite. Significantly, however, the Caudron workers in non-compliance with the union leadership decided to maintain the occupation of their group of factories during the street fighting. They occupied and took partial control of their workshops and elected provisional factory committees in all the component workshops. Their occupation and creation of workers' committees was followed by workers in neighbouring factories, including those at Farman and Salmson, whose representatives contacted the Renault and Caudron committees. Delegates from each of the factories were then nominated to a Central Committee, creating what was in effect an inter-factory committee for the Boulogne-Billancourt and Issy-les-Moulineaux areas (PCI 1944a, 2). This committee went on to draft a common set of demands which included calling for a 50 per cent wage increase, the reintegration of all those workers sacked between 1936 and 1939, workers' control of the hiring and firing of personnel and supervision of factory canteens and food distribution. The intention was that decisions taken would be later ratified by general assemblies of all workers when they returned to the factories. The sharp growth and support given to the inter-factory committee by rank-and-file workers, including those in the PCF, conflicted with the official more hierarchical structures and organisational methods established by the CGT. Indeed, the new committee was considered to be such a risk that the national PCF-dominated leadership of the CGT *Féderation des métaux* rapidly intervened. By the end of August it had convinced the majority of its members to disband both the Renault workers' committee and the inter-factory committee,

replacing them with union branches linked directly to the local CGT. Without the inter-factory links coordinating the interventions of rank-and-file militants it became relatively straightforward for the official union machinery to determine and control the decisions of the separate union branches. Similar inter-factory committees that had been established elsewhere with the involvement of PCI members, for example at Suresnes and Argenteuil-Colombes, were also disbanded. Workers at the Caudron factory on the other hand, refused to accept the instructions from the *Féderation des métaux*, maintained their workers' committee and continued to organise themselves independently of the official CGT apparatus.

Minguet was elected as a shop steward to the provisional Caudron workers' committee. She held this position when the committee became permanent, and continued to do so until the closure of the factory in 1948. The first action of the committee was to dismiss a foreman who had a reputation of having collaborated with the Nazis. Similar actions took place throughout the different factories in the Caudron group. The workers' committees in each of the different Caudron factories in Issy-les-Moulineaux then decided to create a new inter-factory committee so as to better co-ordinate their activities. Taking the Boulogne-Billancourt inter-factory committee as a model, they each elected delegates to a *commision exécutive centrale* (CEC). Minguet was elected deputy secretary of this committee, assisting the secretary Georges Fouet, a PCF member. Indeed, most of the CEC[100] was made up of rank-and-file PCF members (Minguet 1997, 26) who in putting themselves up for election were in effect contesting official

[100] The CEC was made up of 25 members representing different components of the workforce from the group of factories and included unskilled and skilled workers, engineers and even lower levels of management.

CGT policy. These elected positions were later confirmed by mass meetings of workers returning to the factories in the weeks following the liberation of Paris. The CEC drew up a list of demands very similar to that devised by the earlier Boulogne-Billancourt committee with the additional demands that the Caudron factories become fully operational immediately and that a sliding scale of wages be introduced to ensure that pay increased in line with inflation. Resolutions and decisions about the list of demands, and a wide variety of other matters, were brought forward from general assemblies of workers which began to meet on a near daily basis. The militancy of workers in the Caudron group created some dissent within the PCF, with rank-and-file members being prepared to support actions and aspirations in opposition to the regional and national leaderships. Additionally, the success of the workers' committee, whose members were also CGT activists and made use of the former offices of the CGT inside the factory, led to an influx of recruits to the union with eventually 85 per cent of the workforce becoming members (Minguet 1997, 29). The structure of the union inside the factory was parallel with that of the workers' committee, though was not challenged by the *Syndicat des métaux de la région parisienne* until the following year. By the beginning of autumn therefore, the strength of the Caudron workers' committee, with its armed militia,[101] meant that it was able to participate in the management of the factory and have an element of control over production. The authority and politicisation of the workers' committee were such that in early September it made proposals with the intention of transforming this worker participation into one of complete workers' control or *autogestion* of the factory.

[101] The militia remained active until December 1944.

In their attempts to take control of the running of the factory, the Caudron workers' committee successfully managed for a time to reconvert the production line from building warplanes back to its pre-war speciality of civil aircraft construction. This was not achieved without difficulty. First and foremost was the problem of sourcing material, funding and energy supplies needed for a non-war effort production line. Secondly, the workers' committee was moving in a direction opposite to that promoted by the PCF, who were supporting the government's war effort. As a result, it found itself in conflict with both the PCF and the CGT. Even though the committee did have the support of and benefited from the active participation of the mass of workers in the factory, it also reflected the conflicts and contradictions present within the wider workers' movement. For example, not all members of the committee were as committed as the PCI to the idea of *autogestion.* Some were swayed by their loyalty to the PCF with its stress on patriotism and others, in contrast, to the solidarity created by internationalist arguments put forward by Minguet and her supporters.

As a shop steward, however, Minguet had apparently gained much credibility for her stress on direct rank-and-file workers' democracy, and had a sympathetic audience when she raised political questions, in particular, those which highlighted what she saw as the contradictions and deficiencies in the policies of both the CGT and the PCF. On the factory floor and within the union, her support was to be found amongst both PCF and non-PCF members. In her interventions and attempts to create united positions, she made a distinction between those she considered to be true Communists and thus in favour of united fronts, and those who she deemed were 'Stalinised.' Even though some activists

did not hide their affiliation, Minguet, in line with the PCI policy at this time, had not openly agitated as a Trotskyist. As a member of a clandestine organisation she did however want to move her supporters in the factory, particularly those who were PCF members, in a more revolutionary direction. In order to do this, she 'entered'[102] the PCF with the express intention of influencing individuals in the organisation whom she felt were prepared to take action independently of the party bureaucracy. Thus Minguet became a 'revolutionary mole' and hoped therefore to help 'mes amis communistes de ce parti à y faire triompher nos idées communes' (Minguet 1997, 31). As part of a nationwide tactic,[103] members of the PCI 'entered' the PCF and the SFIO with varying degrees of success. PCI member André Essel for example, entered the *Jeunesses socialistes* and was later able to win support from its national leadership for a campaign to legalise the PCI and its newspaper *La Vérité*. All this was at a time when the PCF was trying to promote a return to normalisation after the rapid extension of the various types of workers' councils and militia during the initial weeks of the Liberation. Moreover, the PCF did not want to see autonomous actions which could lead to the illegal expropriation of the means of production by workers. It laid great stress on the idea that any production committees and nationalisations proposed by the Provisional Government were not to be seen in any shape or form as a step towards socialism, but merely the return to the nation of the largest means of production. It did envisage the possibility of the working class, in alliance with the middle class and other bourgoisie, moving towards, what it considered to be, a *maîtrise d'État*. Within Caudron this position was given added emphasis when,

[102] That is, became a member.
[103] The tactic used by some Trotskyists, known as *entrisme sui generis,* of secretly infiltrating in particular the PCF was to become widespread in the following decade after it was officially adopted by the third World Congress of the Fourth International in 1951.

on the 16 January 1945, the Renault group of factories was in turn nationalised, creating the *Régie Renault*. As part of this group, Caudron was to be controlled and administered by the *Société nationale de construction aéronautique du nord* (SNCAN), a body first created during the nationalisations at the time of the Popular Front. According to Luc, the intention behind this was twofold. It was firstly, to make an example of the Renault family accused of having collaborated with the Nazis (Luc1984)[104] and secondly, to permit the rapid production of weapons needed to ensure the defeat of Germany. To this end, despite opposition from Minguet and her supporters, Caudron began once again to produce aircraft for the military.

Inside the Caudron factory, Minguet gave the appearance of being a loyal PCF militant, while at the same time she was building around her, through her union work, a group of sympathisers within the PCF who were prepared at times to question the official party line. As part of the Provisional Government, holding five ministerial posts, the priority of the PCF was to wholeheartedly support the drive to increase production and rebuild the French economy: *la bataille pour la production*. This was supported by the CGT and the slogan 'produire d'abord, revendiquer ensuite' (Steinhouse 2001, 146) became official policy and was to remain so from 1944 until May 1947 (Dreyfus 1995, 218). The campaign pursued by the PCF, as well as the other components of the Provisional Government[105] and the unions, was intended to increase production as quickly as possible and this meant holding down wages, increasing working hours and limiting consumption. The *bataille pour la production* was to take precedence

[104] Their fortune and capital were expropriated. It was only after a court case in July 1967 that they were eventually indemnified.
[105] The SFIO and the *Mouvement Républicain Populaire* (MRP).

over everything else for the immediate future and, in order to achieve it, workers had to be persuaded to relinquish any economic and social demands which could put this at risk. The CGT leader, in a speech on 12 Nov 1944, stated that: 'gagner la bataille de la production est aussi important que d'avoir gagné la bataille de la libération' (Linet 1995, 117). Similarly, at the first national committee meeting of the metalworking section of the CGT (*Fédération des Métaux*) held in December 1944, the decision was taken unanimously to both support the call to 'Produire … Produire … Produire' and also 's'élancer avec enthousiasme vers des méthodes plus rationnelles pour une production accrue' and in doing so, defend the République (Semat 1946, 20). The PCF General Secretary, Thorez, counseled workers not to dream or think about socialism or revolution for the present time, going so far as to call those who spoke of such things as 'enemies of the people' (Luc1984, 13). At the Vélodrome d'Hiver on the 30 November 1944 in a speech in front of 50,000 people, he emphasised the need for national unity and a 'union avec tous les bons Français' (Minguet 1997, 43). He declared that it was the 'class duty' of all French workers to increase production (Linet 1995, 118).

Minguet was convinced that within the Caudron factory many of her fellow workers, including those in the PCF, were not fully supportive of the official policies taken by the CGT leadership. She continued to promote the idea of workers' control and *autogestion* through her positions on both the Caudron workers' committee and the CEC. Support from rank-and-file workers enabled the CEC to maintain control of the factory canteens and food distribution, both seen as vitally important in what was a period of severe shortages. Additionally,

the CEC had control of the committee responsible for the hiring of workers in the Caudron factories. Furthermore, they were able to insist that the factory management communicate proposals and consult with the CEC before taking decisions. The strength of the CEC was such that the Caudron workers were able to obtain pay increases in the face of opposition from both the CGT and PCF, who were at this time opposed to demands for wage rises. *La Vérité* (17 March 1945) describes how for seven hours the Caudron workers occupied the offices of the *Ministère de Travail* until the Minister, Alexandre Parodi, agreed to meet them and eventually acquiesced to their demands for increases in pay.

A further example of the independence of the Caudron workers occurred during the preparations for the 1 May holiday celebrations in 1945. The official line from the CGT, and that of the PCF, was to work on the day and continue production. The CEC of the Caudron group organised a referendum over the issue and up to 80 per cent of the workforce, including PCF members, voted to take strike action on the day, thus bringing them into conflict with the union apparatus. This vote split the PCF membership in the Caudron factory with some voting for strike action and others, not prepared to break party discipline, siding with the management and other potential strike breakers. Similar protestations were made around the country and eventually both the PCF and the CGT were obliged to change their position. They thus called for a day of republican and anti-fascist demonstrations. However, this was accompanied with the proviso that arrangements should be made for workers to make up the lost production in the future.

The CGT and PCF officials in Caudron did not want to let the situation continue in which their authority and policies were questioned or ignored. They were convinced that Trotskyists were at the heart of the opposition to them and began to look for a means to counteract their impact amongst rank-and-file workers. In a report in *Le Monde* (23 May 1945) about the miners strikes taking place in the north of France at that time, CGT officials are quoted as saying: '[q]ue surgisse à l'extrême gauche une opposition trotskiste soutenue par des troubles éléments, voila qui est déjà grave'. The *Syndicat des métaux* had previously unsuccessfully attempted to dissolve the CEC, maintaining that it was the role of the local CGT branches to co-ordinate workers' representatives and their demands, and not that of an unofficial body (*La Vérité,* 15 January 1945, 2). Furthermore, they suspected that there was a Trotskyist presence within the organisation, but the CEC itself was, however, firm in its refusal to join in any denunciation of suspected Trotskyists.

Despite their decision the previous year to work clandestinely, some Trotskyists did in fact agitate openly in the factory. Minguet was by this time aware of three other PCI members, one of whom, René Bleibtreu, became the target in articles in the official PCF newspaper in the Caudron factories, *le Goéland Libéré*, of campaigning to have him sacked. Bleibtreu organised the distribution of *La Vérité* in the factory, selling up to fifty copies of each edition. He was, however, the elected representative of young workers in the factory and 'les militants du PCF échangeaient volontiers les idées avec lui' (Minguet 1997, 50). He was accused in the articles of arson and sabotage with the intention of slowing down production in his workshop. In response, he wrote an open letter to all the

workers in the Caudron factory (Bleibtreu 1945) in which he admitted his membership of the PCI and made reference to 'la lutte que je mène depuis de longs mois pour la défense des intérêts ouvriers'. After vigorously denying the charges of arson and sabotage he outlined how he and the PCI had been at the forefront of the struggle against the Nazis, countering the 'hitlero-trotskyist' allegation made against them by the PCF. The letter then highlighted how he had since stood up for and supported the demands made by workers in the Caudron factory and contrasted this with the political stance taken by the PCF. A position, he states, which led it to turn its back on communism and slander those who were engaged in the class struggle:

> Précisément pour essayer de masquer cette politique de collaboration avec le capitalisme, en faisant passer la lutte de classe pour de l'hitlérisme et les combats revendicatifs pour du sabotage. Le moindre désaccord avec la 'ligne' est taxé d'hitlérisme. Hitlériens les mineurs de Lens qui entrent en grève! Hitlériens les imprimeurs qui revendiquent! Hitlérien tout militant qui combat pour les justes revendications des travailleurs! (Bleibtreu 1945).

Finally, he called for a tribunal to be set up, comprising of representatives from all the different workers' organisations in the factory, to hear his case, making the point that he had received support from rank-and-file PCF members. Maintaining that he had been democratically elected to defend the common interests of all workers in the factory and that he would continue to do so, he asserted that: 'la calomnie qui tend de nous diviser ne me fera pas renoncer à œuvrer à l'unité d'action ouvrière contre les capitalistes'. As a result of the open letter, and the subsequent widespread support for him expressed by workers throughout the factory, the allegations against Bleibtreu ceased. He continued to

work and openly agitate in the factory until ill health caused him to leave the following year.

Throughout the rest of 1945 and the first half of 1946 a stalemate developed in Caudron between the official CGT apparatus and the CEC. The PCF and CGT together continued to push for increased production and so refused to sanction any demands for wage increases or improvements to working conditions which could have put the production rate at risk. The one exception however was to lead campaigns for equal pay for men and women[106] and indeed, the PCF and CGT encouraged women in the factory to train as skilled metalworkers. They continued to oppose demands for industrial action by workers to counter the increasing cost of living and shortage of goods. National membership of the CGT rose to 5,429,000 (*Le Monde,* 8 September 1945) but not all of these supported the official *bataille pour la production* policy of the confederation. This became clearly evident during the 28th Congress of the CGT during the Spring of 1946. While the PCF and its supporters, the *unitaires,* received the backing of 80 per cent of the delegates there was evidence of an underlying unease and reservations amongst some rank-and-file members. A *front ouvrier* tendency had been re-established within the CGT by Trotskyists and this was able to provide a voice for these doubts and criticisms. The tendency, which had gained some significant influence within the primary-school teachers' union, campaigned for greater democracy inside the unions and called for the union leaders to actively support the growing number of struggles and demands for strike action by workers. These had been increasing in response to the worsening of material conditions

[106] Women achieved the right to vote in France in 1945.

that many workers had experienced during the winter of 1945/46. For example, prices continued to rise while wages were blocked. The PCI took this to mean that an upturn in workers' struggles was going to occur and that it was now necessary to intensify criticisms of the union leaderships and at the same time create mechanisms whereby revolutionaries could support workers' demands and unify their different struggles: 'nous engageons le combat contre les responsables du chaos' (PCI 1946a). A PCI internal bulletin from June 1946 makes clear how important it was for the growth of the organisation to be fully involved in every workplace dispute and industrial action by workers. An essential component of this involvement was the use of the united front tactic, which was seen as the best way of convincing other workers to break with the PCF and SFIO.

> Le développement du parti dépend aujourd'hui de sa capacité à s'intégrer à toutes les luttes quel qu'en soit le point de départ. Sur la base de toutes les revendications des masses, nous devons appeler au Front unique le plus souvent possible et sur des points précis … Il doit entraîner dans l'action une fraction plus large de la classe ouvrière que celle qui suit le parti révolutionnaire… Il [le PCI] doit pousser de toutes ses forces à l'unité de l'action des travailleurs et faire du Front unique un des moyens essentiels pour faire entrer les ouvriers qui acceptent encore la tutelle bureaucratique dans l'action. Peu importe la confusion et les illusions qui sont dans leur tête au départ. .. C'est par et dans l'action que le Front unique de classe se constituera pour aboutir aux véritables organismes de Front unique de masses: les Soviets (PCI 1946c).

The PCI leadership had by this time taken the decision to work openly, and its newspaper, *La Vérité,* found a receptive audience inside the Caudron factory. They thus decided that the moment was opportune for Minguet to leave the PCF and declare openly her membership of the PCI. However, rather than simply

quietly announcing her 'change' of affiliation she attempted to use the situation in order to make a political point. At a meeting of the CEC, no longer concerned about pretending to abide by PCF discipline, she proposed that the committee take action to increase wages and establish workers' control over prices and production. In the local PCF branch she used quotations from Lenin to highlight what she described as her revolutionary position and to denounce what she saw as the collaborationist politics of the PCF in government. Her interventions succeeded in creating divisions inside the local PCF branch. Three months later, the PCF leadership let it be known that she was facing expulsion despite the support that she had received from many local members, including from the secretary of the Caudron workers' council. Eventually, the Seine Regional Committee of the PCF issued a declaration stating that Minguet had been expelled from the organisation, for 'hitlero-trotskyist propaganda, links to the 4th International and disagreement with the party line' (Minguet, 1997, 83).

Unlike Georges Chéron at the Hotchkiss factory in 1936 when faced with condemnation from the PCF, Minguet was able to maintain a presence in her workplace until its closure in 1948. In fact, along with six others she was able to set up the first ever PCI workplace branch (Hentgzen 2006, 17) and over the next year was to engage in a near constant political battle with the regional leaderships of the CGT and PCF. The general economic climate at this time was beginning to deteriorate; the cost of living had risen by 65 per cent without any consequent increase in wages. This was compounded in the aeronautical industry in particular, as the spectre of large scale redundancies was also on the horizon. Groups of workers in the Caudron factory continued to openly express their

discontent with the positions of the CGT at general meetings and criticise the PCF, who tried to justify their position by claiming that they were still preparing 'the revolution' but because of changed circumstance were now obliged to follow a different, non-revolutionary route. All this enabled the PCI branch in the factory to gather around it increasing numbers of sympathizers, who read their newspaper *La Vérité Caudron,* and were prepared to defend and vote for the *front ouvrier* tendency in union meetings.

In October 1946, boilermakers employed in the Caudron group of factories in Issy-les-Moulineaux, voted to take strike action in support of their demand for a wage increase. Their immediate supervisor was a PCF member who had originally been elected to the post of director of production by all the workers in a factory-wide election at the time of the creation of the factory committee. He was an ardent follower of Thorez and the PCF leadership and so committed to its policy of 'production, production, production!' He therefore opposed the boilermakers' demands. Faced with his hostility the boilermakers nevertheless took unofficial strike action and as a consequence also found themselves in conflict with the regional union leadership, who accused them of playing into the hands of the 'patrons' and being 'hitlero-trotskyists' (*La Vérité Caudron* 2, February 1947). Shortly afterwards, the first redundancies occurred in Caudron without any concerted opposition by the PCF or the CGT. Minguet and her supporters managed to limit the redundancies to 30 workers but by the springtime of 1947 the crisis in the industry was so great that a second more substantial wave of redundancies took place which included 5 of the 7 PCI branch members. Nevertheless, despite the decline in their numbers the

Trotskyists continued over the next 12 months to campaign against further redundancies and for the transformation of the Caudron factory from the production of military airplanes into, what they deemed to be, more useful or socially needed goods. Such was the support for the PCI that Minguet was able to present in May 1947, in opposition to that of the official CGT list, a *front ouvrier* list of candidates for election to her metalworkers' union branch in the Garibaldi workshop of the factory. The strength of this opposition had been seen earlier in the year when Minguet had again been elected to the factory committee. The CGT official Durand refused to accept the result and so ordered a re-ballot which gave the same result. Once again unhappy with the result, Durand ordered a third ballot and for a third time Minguet was elected (*La Vérité Caudron* 2, February 1947). The metalworkers' union branch election resulted in a majority for the unofficial 'revolutionary' list and thus they gained control of the branch. As a sign of unity with those who had voted against them however, one of the first decisions of the new union branch was to include the former union secretary onto the branch committee. Their important victory was however to be short-lived. Six months later the Garibaldi workshop was closed down and its workers transferred elsewhere in the Caudron factory. The aeronautical industry throughout France had entered into a period of crisis during 1947. Within Caudron, despite having been weakened by the sacking of five of its seven members in February, the PCI branch campaigned unsuccessfully for the factory to be converted into the production of different goods. The crisis led to widespread redundancies, but the CGT was not prepared to take strike action in order to oppose the job losses until November, after the PCF had left the

government. By this time however, it was too late to stop the closure of the Caudron group of factories, which took place in February 1948.

Achievements at Caudron

Two outcomes achieved through the use of the united front tactic by workers at the Caudron factories can be highlighted. Firstly, in the months following the Liberation they were able to occupy and take over the running of the factory. Though complete workers' control was short-lived it was nevertheless the first example of *autogestion* in France and would not be repeated until the 1970s. Secondly, through the creation of the CEC they were able to maintain a measure of autonomy from the official trade union structures of the CGT. Their unity and support for the various workshop committees, including the CEC, also enabled them to retain some control over the running of the factory, while at the same time defending wages and conditions and resisting the pressures of the drive to increase production. Both of these outcomes were based on the actions and participation of rank-and-file workers and both began to question the authority of the established political, trade union and economic status quo. It is, however, difficult to argue that the outcomes resulted purely from the presence of Minguet and other members of the PCI, notwithstanding their support for them and associated interventions. The Caudron factories did have a tradition of militancy dating from the previous decade. The workforce included revolutionary syndicalists and dissident PCF members who 'attendaient un appel de leurs dirigeants politiques et syndicaux pour occuper l'usine comme en 1936' (Minguet 97, 109). Nevertheless, Minguet in particular was to a certain extent able to voice and channel such demands, creating a local network of activists

united in a common aim of wanting to build the power of the workers' committees as a step towards taking greater control over production and eventually full *autogestion*.

Throughout her time in the Caudron factories as a militant trade unionist, Minguet built up a degree of support from her fellow workers through her ability to directly express and represent their demands and decisions. This was reflected in her repeated election as a shop steward and workers' representative on a number of factory committees, the most important one of which was the CEC. She added a political dimension to these roles through her membership of the PCI. In doing so, she questioned the policies of both the CGT and PCF leaderships which led, on occasions, to ordinary members of both organisations to consider their loyalty to them. Even when she hid her Trotskyism her agitation and involvement in the workplace were still based upon this ideology. As a Trotskyist her interventions will have had two principal aims, firstly to create the maximum amount of unity amongst rank-and-file workers, regardless of their political affiliation[107]and secondly to convince her fellow workers to break with their previously-held political ideas and move towards her revolutionary position. She would expect this unity to enable workers, if necessary, to take action independently of the established trade union machinery. This formed the basis for the creation of what was in effect a localised united front in the guise of the CEC. That the CEC remained in existence until the factories closed is an indication of its importance in the eyes of the workforce and the support they gave to it. Minguet undoubtedly highlighted the political differences between her

[107] That is, affiliation to workers' organisation of the Left.

position and that of the official CGT policies by simultaneously raising demands about *autogestion* and pushing workers' demands direct from the factory floor. By such actions, tensions would be created amongst the local union leadership when making decisions between either supporting their local members or the national policies of the CGT. Minguet and the Trotskyists maintained that the CGT national policies were determined to a large extent by the PCF and these were designed to support the rebuilding of French capitalism and therefore, over the long-term, not in the best interests of the working class. The PCI consistently argued that by uniting or collaborating with the middle classes and supporting their policies, workers' leaders then became implicit in the continued exploitation of workers by the bourgeoisie. 'Quand on cesse de lutter contre la bourgeoisie, on devient son auxiliaire contre les ouvriers et les militants qui les défendent' (*La Vérité Caudron* 2, February 1947). The extent to which she was successful in this second endeavour can be seen in the significance given to the perceived Trotskyist threat by the PCF. Aware that there was some danger of being outflanked by those to its left through their calls for revolution and workers' control, the PCF engaged in a concerted battle to lessen the possible influence of the Trotskyists. They opposed any calls for the legalisation of the PCI and even supported the arrest of known members such as Fred Zeller and Rudi Prager. They accused them of being collaborators and enemy agents and even alleged that *La Vérité* was published during the Occupation on the orders of the Gestapo (Minguet 1997, 39). The manner in which Minguet was expelled from the PCF and the continued attacks on anyone thought to be a Trotskyist inside Caudron is testimony to this. On the other hand, the establishment by the PCI of a factory branch in Caudron, the first one of its kind, is an indication of

their confidence in the support for their militant position within the factory. Their newspaper *La Vérité Caudron,* of which at least 65 were sold inside the factory (PCI 1947b, 8), became a blueprint for others as the PCI participated in and supported, as much as its strength would allow, every workers' struggle or dispute that it could, producing specific versions of *La Vérité* for fire-fighters, miners, railway workers and telephonists (Birchall 1988).

Ultimately, however, despite having been able to influence a small number of their fellow workers, the task Minguet and the PCI set themselves was to prove to be too great, particularly when faced with the size and strength of the PCF.[108] The Trotskyists both within Caudron and nationally[109] did not have the numbers or resources to compete with the PCF, whose influence within the CGT was at its apogee during this period.

The period of relative industrial and social harmony existing since the Liberation, largely directed by the CGT and the PCF, was beginning to show signs of strain. Between January and July of 1947 retail prices rose by 93 per cent, food stocks were running low and there had been bread riots in the Centre regions of the country (Rioux 1989, 123). Workers had to work longer hours to increase output and despite government policies designed to reduce prices, wages were not keeping up with inflation. The Trotskyists argued that the bourgeoisie and

[108] PCF membership at the end of 1945 grew to close to one million. In the parliamentary elections in October of that year over 5 million people voted for the PCF giving it 159 seats in the Constituent Assembly Government led by Charles de Gaulle. In the November 1946 parliamentary elections support for the PCF grew even more when they won 182 seats, with nearly 5.5 million votes or 28.2 per cent of the electorate voting for them.

[109] The PCI had their greatest concentration of militants in Paris and the larger cities such as Bordeaux, Lille, Lyon and Nantes. Interestingly they also had a significant presence in the Finistère Département (PCI 1946b).

factory owners were disproportionately profiting from the situation and that the PCF was complicit in this by remaining in government. The PCF held five Ministries, including those of Defence, Health and Labour, in the tripartite government alliance[110] led by Socialist Paul Ramadier. The CGT continued to support the *production d'abord* policy and maintained what was in effect a no-strike policy, considering strikes as 'the weapon of the trusts.'[111] However, increasing numbers of workers began to question the policy of working to increase production and were putting forward demands for improvements in pay and conditions. Indeed, isolated examples of overt dissatisfaction with the PCF and CGT policy had already begun to occur the previous year. The first of these, in January 1946, took the form of strike action by print workers, a significant number of whom were sympathetic to the revolutionary syndicalist tradition and later broke from the CGT in order to join the *Confédération nationale du travail* (CNT). They were incensed at what they saw as the defamatory attitude taken towards them during the dispute by the PCF. This led to printers at the *Humanité* press on the first of February refusing to print one particularly derogatory article by the Communist Minister of Labour, Ambroise Croizat. The newspaper was thus forced to appear with a blank space on the front page (Bron 1970, 289). Later in the year, postal workers successfully staged a series of strikes and elected a strike committee without the support of the CGT leadership, thus overtly challenging their authority. In both cases however, the official union

[110] Consisting of christian-democratic centrists from the MRP, socialists from the SFIO and Communists from the PCF.

[111] These were defined as the international business trusts and cartels that the PCF had decided were the most vehement opponents of the nationalisations and were intent on holding back or sabotaging efforts by French workers to increase production and defend the *République.* They claimed that trusts in many cases were active supporters of fascism and thus demanded their complete destruction.

leaderships eventually regained control, successfully convincing workers to return to work after having negotiated minimal concessions from the employers. Crucially though for the Trotskyists, the dispute involving the postal workers served as a focal point for the 'revolutionary minority'(Peters 1947, 185-186) who could see that pressure for a change in the CGT policy from rank-and-file union members was starting to be translated into a growing preparedness to take industrial action. Sporadic strikes and stoppages took place during the rest of 1946 including some in the metal industries around Paris, traditionally the bastions of PCF influence and bases of CGT power. But it was the strike movements of 1947 which were to cause the greatest difficulties for both the CGT and the PCF. Strikes occurred in three key sectors, the printing, automotive and railway industries during the first half of the year, followed by more generalised strikes between September and November. According to Yvan Craipeau, 'ce qui domine la période, c'est les grèves' (1999, 191). In the space of twelve months 3,598 strikes took place involving 2,997,000 strikers (Cortois & Lazar 2000, 281). Trotskyists were at the heart of these movements and achieved notoriety out of all proportion to their numbers. Indeed, according to Marcel Thourel, a former PCF member who later joined the PCI, 1947 was 'une année où les trotzkystes firent beaucoup parler d'eux dans la presse bourgeoise et même au parlement' (Thourel 1980, 303).

The Renault strike

The next part of this chapter examines how discontent amongst one influential group of workers resulted in a strike, which at one point questioned the authority and influence of the PCF leaders of the CGT in one of their key bastions, the vast

Boulogne-Billancourt Renault factory on the western outskirts of Paris. Seen by later Trotskyists as 'une victoire pour les ouvriers, qui reconquirent la solidarité entre eux-mêmes et la liberté d'expression face à tous ceux qui prétendent leur imposer leur loi' (UC 1995,1), the strike was a precursor to a concerted period of social and industrial unrest. As such, for a short time it also put at risk the continued existence of the Ramadier Government. The Strike Committee responsible for organising and leading the strike was initiated and built by a small group of Trotskyists, but included in its number, members of the SFIO, PCF as well as those without political affiliation. Crucially, it received the support at one point of the majority of the workforce in the factory, with the result that in order to reassert their influence, the PCF and CGT had to change tactics halfway through the dispute from one of vehement opposition to one of approval (Enkiri 1971).

The CGT leadership had previously been faced with dissent from some of its members in the early part of 1947 when the print workers in Paris once again went on strike. Establishing their own action and strike committee independently of the CGT and refusing to follow the orders of the official union leaders, the print workers began to challenge the hegemony of the PCF in the CGT. Their two main demands were to establish a guaranteed monthly minimum wage of at least 9000 francs and a demand, put forward by the PCI since 1944, for a sliding scale of wages which would automatically keep pace with inflation. The strike demands were opposed by the PCF, who took the position that they breached the government's wage freeze policy and would harm its drive to bring inflation under control. Before the dispute the CGT had in fact advocated fixing a

minimum wage calculated to be 7000 francs a month, but they had not proposed taking any action to support the demand. Furthermore, the figure arrived at by the CGT was on the basis of a 200 hour working month, in other words a 48 hour week. This change from CGT policy of a 40 hour week was justified by the union leadership due to the imperatives of the *bataille de la production* (Bois 1988). The strikers' demands were however fully supported by the Trotskyists and appeared on PCI campaign leaflets produced for the Municipal election campaigns held during this period. This campaign material also included demands for workers' control over prices, control over food distribution, support for industrial action by workers and the withdrawal of French troops from Indochina.[112] The strike by the print workers led to the disappearance overnight of all the daily and weekly newspapers and journals from kiosks and newsstands unless they had been approved by the strike committee. The one newspaper that did receive such approval was *La Vérité* (Chauvin 2006, 236). The PCI had from the outset supported the print workers and on the week of the strike their newspaper sold 110,000 copies (Thourel 1980, 303).

The CGT and PCF were having difficulty in containing the growing anger felt by workers over the continuing deterioration in their living standards. When Citroën workers went on strike for a pay increase in February it was vehemently opposed by the *Syndicat des métaux*. The strikers were so incensed at this lack of support for them that when Georges Hénaff, PCF member and part of the regional leadership of the CGT, came to speak to them they stopped his car and attempted to turn it over with him still inside it (Bois 1947, 9). Elsewhere in the Paris

[112] 1947 saw the start of the colonial independence struggles particularly in Vietnam and Madagascar. These struggles were supported by the Trotskyists and initially opposed by the PCF.

region partial strikes resulting in pay increases had occurred since January in different sectors of the metalworking industries. Renault workers realised that their pay had fallen behind that of other metalworkers. This was further compounded by the fact that production figures made available to the Renault workers showed that while vehicle production had increased by 150 per cent in the previous twelve months, their wages had only increased by 22.5 per cent (Bois 1947, 9). Aware of the growing discontent and the increasing preparedness of workers in different parts of the Renault site to overtly criticise official union policy and its hostility to claims for wage increases, the CGT, at the end of February, devised and proposed a bonus system, the *prime progressive de production* (PPP). This was intended to allow wages to rise through increasing production and therefore not counter the government wage freeze policy. Fallachon (1972, 119-121) describes several spontaneous, partial disputes in different parts of the Renault factory where workers demanded increases in bonuses. He notes how the CGT was able to channel their demands and ensure disputes remained localised on a workshop by workshop basis and not become generalised throughout the whole of the factory. So as to meet productivity targets jointly devised by the factory management and the PCF-inspired Joint Production Committees, the CGT shop stewards, who were in the main PCF members and had to some extent taken over the role of foremen in the factory, were not averse to denouncing as saboteurs those workers who refused to comply. Inside some sections of the factory, the near continuous pressure to meet these production targets combined with the inability of wages to keep up with rising prices resulted in overt opposition to the CGT promotion of bonuses, and the consequent production line speed-ups required in order to increase wages.

Furthermore, the PPP was seen by workers as being unfair and unequal as it was hierarchically linked. In other words, production line workers received less than white collar workers and amongst production line workers themselves, the more highly skilled received higher bonuses than the unskilled. In department number six of the factory, part of the Collas workshop, 850 workers out of 1200 signed a petition initiated by Trotskyists belonging to the *Union communiste* (UC) opposing the PPP. The UC had built up a small presence[113] in the factory and had been publishing a factory bulletin, *La voix des travailleurs de chez Renault*, since February (UC 1994 & 1995). The purpose of the petition was twofold; firstly, to make workers throughout the factory aware that an overt opposition to the CGT policy existed, and secondly, to gain factory floor support in order to confront the CGT leaders directly. This they intended to do by raising the issue of the bonus scheme, in particular how it could be shared more equitably, at a forthcoming union meeting where it was planned to elect representatives to a joint management-union production committee. At the meeting the union leadership refused to allow any amendments to the structure of the PPP to be discussed and physically threatened those responsible for the petition (Fallachan 1972, 120). The UC supporters saw no other alternative than to conclude that they would have to continue their campaign against the PPP without the cooperation of the union officials.

Inside the factory the most important union confederation was the CGT representing 50 per cent of the 30,000 strong workforce (Fallachan 1972, 113)

[113] Estimated by Nick to be comprised of no more than 12 members during the whole of this period. (Nick 2002, 232 & 342).

and it held by far the majority of seats on the *comité d'entreprise*. To some extent the CGT leadership in the factory took for granted that it would always obtain the support of the workforce. As a consequence it very rarely called union meetings and when it did so, these were sparsely attended. In fact both Fallochan (1972, 13) and Bois (1947, 9) suggest that the majority of union members were not up to date with their union subscriptions and were becoming disenchanted with the way that the unions were only prepared to campaign for increased wages through changes to the different bonus schemes. It was this disenchantment combined with a perceived willingness to take industrial action that enabled the Trotskyists inside the factory to build support for strike action in the face of union hostility. With an estimated 100 supporters from amongst the workforce between them (Fallachan 1972, 116) the Trotskyists were organised into three separate organisations in the Renault factory. The smallest and least influential of these was the *Gauche communiste* (GC), the French section of the *Gauche communiste internationale* created in 1946[114] and much influenced by the Italian militant Amedeo Bordiga.[115] The GC limited itself to a propagandist role inside the CGT through the publication of its journal *L'Internationaliste*. The PCI, led by a militant called Daniel Renard, were present inside the factory particularly in department forty-nine. Their position immediately prior to the strike action seems to have been one of wanting to apply pressure on the union machinery and made no independent attempt to outflank the PCF from the left, although they did

[114] The *Gauche communiste internationale* had its theoretical origins as a left-wing tendency inside both the third Communist International and the Bolshevik Party. Internationally the tendency was known as the 'Left Communist' and included such people as Sylvia Pankhurst amongst its membership. They held a sectarian position regarding working with social democrats and opposed Lenin's position concerning revolutionaries contesting parliamentary elections (Lenin was in favour). Lenin wrote his famous 1920 pamphlet 'Left-wing Communism, an infantile disorder' as an argument against the Left Communists. They participated in the Left Opposition in the second half of the 1920s and paid allegiance to Trotsky.

[115] Therefore known as Bordiguists.

attempt to organise workers into what they called the *Front ouvrier Renault* and did produce factory bulletins of the same name. However, once the strike movement had begun, initially in departments six and eighteen, PCI members played a full and active role in encouraging other workers to join and extend the strike. Several PCI members were subsequently elected to the Strike Committee (Minguet 1997, 96). The third, and most significant group of Trotskyists inside the factory, were those belonging to the UC. They had been able to build up a group of sympathisers around them in departments six and eighteen and were at the forefront of the action prior to and during the strike. The leading militant of the group was Pierre Bois, a twenty five year old fitter from department six. Bois had become a Trotskyist in late 1941, and after escaping from forced labour service in 1943, he spent the rest of the war in hiding.[116] He was in regular contact with the leadership of UC[117] particularly its founder, the Romanian Trotskyist David Korner.[118] After the war, at the instigation of the UC leadership, he worked at the Citroën car factory where he stayed for eleven months. In June 1946, the organisation then sent him to work at Renault with the clear intention of building up a support base inside the factory. Bois managed to do this and in doing so provided a focus for those prepared to take industrial action independently of the CGT hierarchy.

Aware of the different disputes that had broken out throughout the factory and the growing opposition to official CGT policy since the start of the year, the Trotskyists needed to find a common demand if they were going to build up this

[116] At time of the Liberation he was 'arrested' and interrogated by the PCF.
[117] At that time called the *Groupe communiste (ème Internationale)*. They changed their name to *Union communiste (4ème Internationale)* in 1944.
[118] Also known as: Barta, Albert or A.Mathieu.

opposition to the level needed for any successful strike action to take place. By early March, both the PCI and UC supporters had arrived at a possible unifying pay claim. This was to be for an across-the-board wage increase of ten francs per hour[119] for all Renault workers regardless of their status. The PCI had already for several weeks, through their united front organisation *Front ouvrier,* raised the slogan of 'ten francs an hour' and linked it to demands for the return of the 40 hour week, the abolition of piece work and workers' control (Craipeau 1999, 192). Furthermore, both groups agreed that the only way that such a demand could be achieved, in the face of combined management and CGT opposition, was to simultaneously agitate for strike action across the factory.

Precisely how this agitation should take place created some division amongst UC and PCI militants. The PCI wanted to establish action committees and expected its militants to take a leading position on them. The UC was initially opposed to the creation of formal structured committees, although one had already been set up at the end of February which brought together workers from different political tendencies along with those who were non-aligned. The UC preferred to call open meetings of workers as and when deemed necessary under the banner of their factory bulletin *La voix des travailleurs de chez Renault.* They were not opposed to shop floor workers' committees as such, but concerned that if they were only comprised of self-appointed individuals, and not truly representative of the mass of workers, then they would not gain the support of the workforce and in essence be seen as no different from the bureaucratic PCF-run union structures. The task of revolutionaries, they said, was to 'help workers set up

[119] This figure had originally been put forward by CGT leader (and PCF member) Benoît Frachon at a committee meeting of the union federation. However, no decisions or recommendations were taken regarding the action necessary to achieve it.

committees, not appoint ourselves as 'struggle committees' (Bois 1988, 5). The PCI, on the other hand, envisaged action committees to be semi-permanent bodies acting as united fronts which could serve to recruit the most militant and confident workers and thus become 'des creusets d'où jaillira une nouvelle direction de la classe ouvrière' (*La Vérité,* 21 March 1947). The discussions over the exact nature of the workers' committee were however being overtaken by events on the ground, which were rapidly moving towards one of confrontation. The action committee agreed as a matter of urgency to push the ten franc demand throughout the factory and attempt to unite all other grievances around it. Workers in department five walked out in mid-March over a demand for two francs per hour pay rise. UC supporters from department six attempted to bring their workshop out on strike in solidarity. Facing hostility from PCF shop stewards, only a minority of workers was prepared to take strike action, but they were however, prepared to put their names to and circulate a petition demanding the ten franc per hour wage increase. This seems to have gained widespread support, thus forcing the CGT stewards to present the demands to management. The revolutionary left saw this extensive support for their demands as an opportunity to take things further. 'Devant la carence syndicale et le désir de lutte des ouvriers, les groupes d'extrême-gauche réagissent, sentant qu'ils ont là une occasion de battre en brèche l'influence du PCF' (Fallachan 1972, 121).

On 17 April, a mass meeting of workers from department six was held at lunchtime outside the canteen. They agreed on principle to take action over the ten franc demand and set up an 'action committee' in order to organise and pursue the claim. Management refused to recognise delegates from the

committee, claiming that they were not 'legal', that is to say, that they were not CGT-approved representatives of the workforce. Nevertheless, over the next few days unofficial discussions between the two sides did take place but without any success. The committee was mandated by another mass meeting on Wednesday 23 April to make necessary preparations for eventual strike action at the most appropriate moment. This occurred the following Friday when workers from departments six and eighteen downed tools. The strike was reported the following day in *Le Monde* under the headline, '[m]algré l'opposition de la CGT la grève partielle se poursuit aux usines Renault' (*Le Monde,* 27 April 1947). Interestingly, *L'Humanité* did not have a report on the strike until the 29 April, 4 days after it had begun, and this was to denounce the strike as being the work of a handful of 'provocateurs' and supporters of the *Rassemblement du peuple français* (RPF), recently created by Charles de Gaulle. The report in *Le Monde* went on to describe how 1500 workers had stopped work in support of their pay claim and how individual strikers attempted to extend the strike to other departments of the factory. This brought them into conflict with CGT shop stewards who, in no uncertain terms, exhorted them to return to work. Notwithstanding this opposition, the strikers went on to strengthen their committee by electing delegates and transforming it into a strike committee. The first task it determined for itself was the setting up of picket lines which were respected by workers the following morning. The Trotskyists received support for the strike from members of the *Jeunesses Socialistes* in the SFIO as well as a small number of anarchists. Messages of support also came from the C*onfédération française des travailleurs chrétiens* (CFTC), but this was seen by the PCI as being more to do with their obsessive anti-Communist Catholicism

and the Strike Committee did not encourage joint activity with them. On each of the first days of the strike the *Syndicat des métaux,* in order to discredit the Strike Committee, distributed leaflets which sought to portray the characters and motivations of the strike leaders in a negative light. Crucially the *Syndicat des métaux* leaflets did not present an alternative to the ten franc wage demand (*Le Monde,* 27 April 1947; Monatte 1947, 4).

The strike continued for another three weeks until the 16 May and was eventually supported by the majority of the 30,000 strong workforce. This was despite the initial opposition of the CGT and PCF. They endeavoured to bring into disrepute the strike leaders and put a stop to the movement, even going as far as to physically attack the strikers and their pickets (Fallachan 1972, 125). 'Les staliniens ont tout mis en œuvre pour briser le mouvement et reprendre le contrôle de la grève' (PCI 1947c, 1). In spite of this, support for the Strike Committee was at such a level that the CGT leadership was in danger of losing control of one of its most important bases. The preparatory work undertaken by the former action committee meant that the Strike Committee was well organised and so was able to effectively control many of the crucial events. However, its major weakness was that at no point was the management of the factory prepared to officially negotiate with Pierre Bois and other delegates from the Strike Committee. The factory director, Pierre Lefaucheux, maintained throughout the strike that he was only prepared to talk to the 'legitimate' CGT representatives (*Le Monde,* 30 April 1947). It was at this point that the Strike Committee discussed the possibility of building and encouraging solidarity action and strikes by workers in other industries. According to an internal PCI bulletin, delegations

of Renault strikers were sent to, and received support from, other automobile and metallurgical factories such as Renodin, Unic, Compteurs de Montrouge and Caudron (PCI 1947c, 3). Realising the importance of this development and wanting to ensure that the Renault strike remained localised, the CGT and PCF officials changed their stance and the local CGT and PCF leaderships started to show support for the concerns of their members inside Renault. But this did not mean that they supported the Strike Committee and the Trotskyists. At a meeting on the 28 April, Plaisance, a CGT official from the factory, denounced the strikers as 'la poignée de gaullistes-trotskystes-anarchistes qui ont voulu faire sauter l'usine' (Elgey 1993, 355). At an official CGT meeting the same day, union officials refused to allow delegates from the Strike Committee to address the meeting. A running battle seems to have taken place throughout the factory between officials loyal to the CGT position and those rank-and-file workers who were trying to extend the strike. A similar pronouncement to that of Plaisance was made by Georges Hénaff, who not only alleged that the strikers were in the pay of de Gaulle, but also accused them of wanting to attack ordinary workers and see their blood flow (Elgey 1993, 355). Taking as an example the actions of their fellow workers at Citroën earlier in the year, the Renault strikers booed and hissed Hénaff when he spoke and threatened to throw him into the Seine (Thourel 1980, 303).

In order to begin to regain control of the situation, the CGT started to put forward alternative demands. The first of these, on the evening of Monday 28 April, was for a three franc increase in the production bonus rate and a call for an official stoppage in support of the demand of one hour the next day. At the CGT meeting

the following morning[120] the union officials attempted to persuade the membership to accept the demand, and return to work in the afternoon. The CGT shop stewards presented their demands to Lefaucheux who persisted in his refusal to negotiate directly with members of the Strike Committee (Fallachan 1972, 125).The suggested return to work was overwhelmingly rejected and the workforce remained on strike in defiance of the CGT, joined on the Wednesday by white-collar workers from the administration offices. In the meantime, the demand for a three franc bonus rate increase had also been rejected by the management.[121] Throughout the factory, workers were electing more delegates to the Strike Committee, which was meeting in virtual permanent session in the office of a foreman from workshop six. Amongst the discussions that took place were suggestions to once again send delegates to neighbouring factories such as Citroën and Salmson, with the intention of asking workers there to come out on strike in solidarity. 'En lançant son appel à la grève générale, le Comité de grève avait affirmé sa conviction que la victoire totale des revendications pouvait être obtenue' (*La Voix des travailleurs de chez Renault* 6, 20 May 1947). The Strike Committee produced a leaflet for distribution at the annual May Day demonstration in Paris, calling on workers elsewhere to strike because:

> Vous êtes dans la même situation que nous et que personne ne peut se résigner à la situation actuelle. Par conséquent, puisque la lutte est inévitable et nécessaire, il faut que nous nous mettions tous ensemble en mouvement, car seule l'union de tous les travailleurs assurera la victoire pour tous (Korner 1947).

[120] Described in *Le Monde* (30 April 1947) as 'passablement agité.'
[121] As Renault was owned by the State the factory management maintained that all wage negotiations had to be agreed to by the Minister of Labour Ambroise Croizat, who was a PCF member.

The leaflet reiterated the demands for a ten franc pay increase and sliding scale of wages. It called for solidarity action explaining that '[n]otre usine a commencé le mouvement. Nous appelons tous nos camarades de la métallurgie, tous les ouvriers de la Région parisienne, à se joindre à nous' (Korner 1947). For its part, the PCI produced a special edition of their newspaper devoted to the strike with the headline, 'Renault suit le comité de grève' (*La Vérité,* 30 April 1947). It went on to make the call for a general strike.

At this point the CGT leadership, faced with at least 20,000 workers on strike, appeared to be on the brink of alienating much of its membership inside the factory. A report in *The Times* highlighted the difficulty faced by the official union leaders stating that:

> [t]he significance of the strike lies in the fact that this is the first time that union discipline has broken down in an industrial plant since the CGT, and the Communists who lead it, accepted the Government's policy of holding wages at present levels. … The Renault strike is a revolt against both the existing wage policy and against present union leadership. … The CGT leaders have seen in the strike a direct challenge to their authority, and a manoeuvre designed to discredit their moderation (*The Times*, 1 May 1947).

The *Syndicat des métaux* therefore decided to propose an increased wage claim, hoping that in doing so they could regain the confidence of rank-and-file members, begin to control the strike movement and quickly persuade workers to return to work. The PCF leadership now also decided to justify the strike movement and issued an ambiguous statement saying that they supported 'legitimate union demands' (Lefranc 1967, 48).The new demand, which was to

apply to all metalworkers in the Paris region, adopted the ten franc figure of the Strike Committee, but as with the previous proposal it was based upon an increase in the production bonus and not a flat rate hourly increase. Furthermore, the CGT agreed that the only way that it could be achieved would be through speed-ups and productivity increases (*Le Monde*, 1 May 1947). It justified this position by arguing that it was in line with union policy as a result of a national committee decision taken by the confederation on the 12 March. This decision stated that if workers produced more then it should be them who receive a financial reward and not 'industrialists and speculators.' Undoubtedly as a means of demonstrating to management that it had regained control of the workforce, the union chose this moment to issue a call for a return to work and organised a factory wide referendum on this issue. The decision however was to continue with the strike by 12,671 votes to 8,715 (Bois 1988, 11; Fallachon 1972, 141; Lefranc 1967, 49). Even though their recommendation had been rejected, the CGT had, by organising the referendum, begun to seize the initiative in the dispute. With the PCF on board they were able to use all available regional and national resources at their disposal in order to ensure that they took the situation in hand. This was deemed to be a matter of urgency, because the Strike Committee was encouraging the election of new union delegates throughout the factory in order to replace those who had not supported the strike action. Indications seemed to be that they would win the support of up to two thirds of the electorate (*Le Monde*, 3 May 1947).

At the start of the second week of the strike, with the CGT in the ascendancy, the national leadership had agreed to allocate one million francs strike pay to the

Renault strikers. The Strike Committee decided to issue a further call to neighbouring workplaces for solidarity action. Having received messages of support the previous week from militant postal workers and from factories such as Caudron, Unic and Gnome & Rhone they now wanted to translate this verbal support into industrial action. *Le Monde* (4 May 1947) reported that worker delegates were preparing to take unofficial industrial action regarding wage increases in the Caudron, Alsthom and possibly the Citroën factories. Strikes had already broken out in a few workplaces in the north of France, in particular in Loos, Roubaix and Douai. At Suresnes in the Paris region, 1500 workers at the Unic factory stopped work on the Monday morning and held a general meeting to discuss whether to come out on extended strike in support of the Renault workers. Not having the confidence to strike without the official backing of the CGT, they voted by 851 to 455 votes to return to work in the afternoon. Sporadic and increasingly numerous, short-lived strikes began to occur in different parts of the country, affecting a variety of industries ranging from river and canal boatmen in the north, iron and steel workers at St Dizier in the east, tannery workers at Roanne in the centre, public works staff at Brest in the west, to nationwide state employees such as customs officers. Delegates from the Renault Strike Committee are reported to have organised meetings in numerous factories, particularly in the Paris region, where official CGT representatives were sometimes overwhelmed and found it impossible to prevent workers from voting to take or even extend strike action as occurred at the Turbauto factory in Levallois-Perret (*Le Monde*, 9 May 1947). It is likely that workers and their shop stewards in these mass meetings were pulled in two directions; wanting on the one hand to be loyal to the union, and on the other wanting to take action and

support the Renault strikers. Certainly the CGT were not yet in complete control and as a consequence, were anxious to find a way of containing the situation.

Official CGT representatives continued to negotiate with Lefaucheux and the Renault management while simultaneously making representations to the government. The negotiations were given added urgency by the rising apprehensions expressed in some quarters (Evans & Godin 2005, 21-27) which saw the Renault strike as being the precursor of a movement which could lead to a possible social upheaval similar to that of 1936. Both sides were thus now eager to reach an agreement, and so on Thursday 8 May the previously rejected claim of a three franc bonus rate increase was resurrected and accepted by union negotiators and the government. The Renault managers also agreed, but with the proviso that no payments would be made until production increases had reached a predetermined figure. The proposal was put to the workforce the following day in a ballot organised by the CGT. Of the more than 19,000 workers who took part in the vote, 12,075 voted for a return to work compared with 6,866 who wanted to pursue the strike. However, workers in the Collas sections of the factory where the strike had first begun and where the Strike Committee had most of its support, refused to return to work immediately. They supported a motion from the Strike Committee which called for a continuation of the strike until the management agreed to pay workers for the eight strike days. The CGT leadership opposed the actions of this minority, criticising them for their continued strike action. Benoît Frachon went further with his comments; describing them as 'gréviculteurs, provocateurs, ennemis de la CGT' (*Le Monde*, 13 May 1947).The Collas workers did have support elsewhere in the factory,

even from those workers who had agreed to return to work. This was shown by the fact that on the Wednesday following the ballot they collected the sum of 60,000 francs and presented it to the Collas strikers. The effect of the continued strike by this militant minority was to virtually close the whole factory. Workers in the Collas section were responsible for manufacturing pieces which were needed in order to complete production elsewhere in the factory and were therefore in a strong position. When these pieces failed to arrive, production lines were obliged to shut down, thus bringing to a halt the manufacture of finished cars.

Faced with this level of support for the strikers the CGT decided to pursue a claim for payment of the strike days as demanded by the Strike Committee. This time the Strike Committee, as well as the official CGT delegates, were received by Lefaucheux. He even went to department six to speak to the Strike Committee in person. He proposed that payment for wages lost due to the strikes could be made up by the workforce coming in to work on Sundays and public holidays and would be paid for at an overtime rate. Furthermore he offered a 1500 franc loan to anyone who wanted it, to be paid back in installments. The Strike Committee refused these proposals and continued to stop production. Lefaucheux in turn refused to negotiate publicly, saying that it was not within his power to meet the Strike Committee demands. He claimed that the decision was in the hands of the government. On the 15 May, Labour Minister Daniel Mayer met with Lefaucheux. This resulted in a proposal to pay a return to work bonus of 1,600 francs to all workers in the factory (Bois 1947, 12) when everyone had returned to work (*Le Monde*, 16 May 1947). On top of this, a loan of 900 francs

was offered, repayable in six 150-franc installments. On the recommendation of the Strike Committee the Collas workers voted to accept this and return to work. *L'Humanité* (17 May 1947) claimed that the return to work was a great victory for the CGT. The Strike Committee, on the other hand, maintained that if it had not been for their preparedness to continue the strike no one would have received any payment for the days on strike and the union officials would have been happy to return to work with just the 3 franc bonus rate increase.

Consequences of the strike

Although the eventual settlement of the Renault dispute of 1947 fell far short of the Strike Committee's original demand for a ten franc per hour increase, UC member Pierre Bois claimed that it could nevertheless take credit for achieving the improvement in wages. It was the confidence and preparedness of the Collas workers to take united action independently of the union bureaucracy, he maintained, that had forced the CGT eventually to put their weight behind the strike movement. Bois goes on to say that the Collas workers were the only ones who systematically attempted to go out to workers in other factories and agitate for solidarity action. Throughout the dispute the UC had maintained that the most effective way to ensure that the ten franc demand was achieved was through the extension of the action into a general strike. Allied to this was an emphasis upon rank-and-file workers actively leading, enlarging and deciding upon the direction of the movement through the establishment of elected strike committees in each workplace. The ten franc demand brought together substantial numbers of workers from differing political traditions into a united front over a single issue. The fact that many of these workers were prepared independently to take action

in the face of hostility from the official union representatives, created a potentially unstable situation for the CGT and PCF officials which they could not ignore. As a PCI document later noted about the Renault strike, 'on voit les militants du PCF agir délibérément contre leurs chefs briseurs de grève, voire suivre les communistes internationalistes' (PCI 1947e, 3). In the view of the union officials and PCF leaders, losing control in the factories to militants to their left such as the UC and PCI was unacceptable. This would have then allowed the Trotskyists to further develop their political organisation and agitation amongst the workforce. It is interesting to note, however, that initially the UC factory bulletin *La voix des travailleurs de chez Renault* tended to focus mostly on economic demands or organisational concerns. It was only after the strike that wider political issues were raised, such as those related to the nationalisation of industry and the establishment of workers' control in the Renault factory. They did, however, highlight what they saw as the contradictions inherent in the politics of the PCF which, on the one hand, claimed to defend the interests of ordinary workers, and on the other, was part of a government which was trying to rebuild French capitalism and thus oppose workers' struggles. Nevertheless, through their attempts to generalise the strike movement elsewhere they also put forward the idea of building a corresponding network of strike committees, as the following extract from the editorial in *La voix des travailleurs de chez Renault* No 9 (11 June 1947) demonstrates, but precise political objectives and outcomes linked to this movement were never clearly defined:

> Si, à la suite des cheminots, la classe ouvrière tout entière entre en lutte, et si elle s'unifie sous la baguette d'un seul comité central de grève générale, tous les espoirs seront permis désormais.

There were, however, political consequences as a result of the Renault strike for the established parliamentary parties, most noticeably for the PCF. As minority members of the government they had promoted the policies of wage restraint and production increases, but in Renault they had been faced with their own rank-and-file members united in a strike initiated by Trotskyists. Concerned about losing support and members the party reluctantly put its weight behind the strike. However, they were now faced with the problem of seeming to be disloyal to the government. When questioned about this by the Prime Minister, PCF leader Thorez replied: '[t]he CGT has been overrun, or is in danger of being overrun, by Trotskyist elements. In order to prevent this movement from getting out of hand, we decided last night to support the workers' demands' (*Time*, 12 May 1947). Prime Minister Ramadier took the opportunity to organise a vote of confidence in Parliament about his economic policies. The PCF refused to support this, thus giving Ramadier the pretext he needed to remove them from their ministerial positions. This in turn precipitated a move to the left by the PCF which took up a progressively more confrontational position. No longer constrained by ministerial responsibilities, they encouraged the economic demands raised by the rising tide of rank-and-file worker militancy. According to Fallachon, one result of the Renault strike was that it had 'ouvert l'écluse, et toute une vague de grèves a déferlé d'autant plus facilement que les militants communistes de la CGT et le PCF ne s'y opposaient plus' (1972, 132). Under their influence, the CGT moved from 'une orientation conciliante à une opposition résolue' (Béroud & Mouriaux

1997, 9). Later that year, the PCF unequivocally took the lead in a series of nationwide industrial conflicts which, through the judicious use of revolutionary rhetoric, led some commentators to suggest in the late autumn, that the PCF was in fact preparing insurrectionary strikes.[122] The main headline in *Le Monde* (21 October 1947) for example, stated that 'M.Henaff appelle les grévistes du métro à faire capituler le gouvernement.' Leon Blum later declared in the National Assembly that:

> Le danger est double. D'une part le communisme international a ouvertement déclaré la guerre à la démocratie française. D'autre part il s'est constitué en France un parti dont l'objectif – et peut-être l'objectif unique – est de dessaisir la souveraineté nationale de ses droits fondamentaux (*Le Monde,* 22 November 1947).

It is not clear whether the intention of the PCF was to create a situation of such social and industrial instability that Ramadier would be forced to bring them back into government, knowing that they would be able to persuade their union militants and strikers to return to work. What is more unambiguous however, is that the PCF was 'criticised' by the Soviets at the meeting of the Cominform[123] in September over their willingness to participate in 'bourgeois' governments and this effectively brought to an end their attempts to do so, putting them firmly in the opposition camp (*Le Monde,* 7 October 1947). During the Cominform meeting:

> Zdanov [Stalin's representative] launched a withering attack on PCF policy since Liberation … French Communists were attacked for their alliances with bourgeois and

[122] By early December the government had called up 80,000 military reservists and had deployed tanks in some industrial areas so as to regain order (*Le Monde,* 2 December 1947).
[123] The Soviet-dominated Communist Information Bureau founded in September 1947 at the beginning of what became the Cold War.

> social democratic parties … the PCF had to move into open opposition (Evans & Godin 2005, 26).

Through their leadership of these strikes, the PCF had by the end of the year successfully regained the upper hand within the workers' movement and neutralised any danger to them from the left. The result was that they were thus able to effectively prevent the Trotskyists from playing any significant overt role inside the CGT for the next twenty years, until the events of May 1968. 'Vingt années passeront avant que l'on entende reparler des "trotskistes", de leur organisation renaissante et de leurs publications. Ce sera en mai 1968 avec Krivine' (Zeller 2000, 240).

The PCF-dominated CGT leadership was, however, by the end of 1947 encountering resistance from other quarters, including sections of its own membership who had become vociferous in their denunciations of the PCF tactics during the autumn strike wave. The criticisms accentuated the differences between the two main tendencies within the union confederation, that of those still known as the *unitaires*, sympathetic to the PCF, and those former anti-Communist *confédérés* now grouped together as the *Amis de Force ouvrière*, who were close to the SFIO and supportive of many of the government's policies. The divisions within the confederation came to head on the 18 December when the *Force ouvrière* grouping decided to break from the CGT and in April 1948 created a new union, purportedly with funding from American union organisations and the CIA, known as *CGT-Force ouvrière* (CGT-FO) under the leadership of Léon Jouhaux. This rupture accurately mirrored that of the two separate organisations existing before 1936.

Evaluation

For a united front to be successful it is necessary, as highlighted in Chapter Two, for those involved to have agreed a common demand or set of aims. Depending upon the precise form the united front takes, such aims can evolve over time as intermediate demands are achieved. At Caudron, the united front took the form of a workers' committee which was maintained over a period of four years. At Renault, on the other hand, the united front took the form of a strike committee which barely lasted four weeks. In practice, this strike committee acted as a 'soviet' in a similar way to that which had occurred at Hotchkiss. In both cases, agreed aims between the different components ensured that the united fronts were sustained. The Trotskyist activists however, had other aims over and above the specific demands put forward by the two committees. As Trotsky pointed out in 1938 as part of his 'Transitional Programme':

> He (the revolutionary) takes an active part in mass trade unions for the purpose of strengthening them and raising their spirit of militancy … Only on the basis of such work within the trade unions is successful struggle possible against the reformists, including those of the Stalinist bureaucracy (Trotsky 1938).

Other key aims of the Trotskyists therefore involved the promotion of militant activity by rank-and-file workers independently of the established union leaderships, with the intention of attracting those involved towards the revolutionary organisations. How successful they were in this endeavour is difficult to assess. While there is no consensus on the precise figures, various commentators are nonetheless agreed that membership of the PCI did increase between 1944 and 1948. As Hentzgen (2006, 17) notes:

> Les trotskystes gagnent quelques militants ouvriers entre 1946 et 1948, surtout des métallurgistes. Entre juillet et septembre 1946, le PCI constitue chez Caudron sa première cellule d'entreprise. Peu après, il crée d'autres cellules d'entreprise. Les plus actives sont Renault, Chausson et Unic. Dans les années suivantes, le PCI considérera toujours ce début d'implantation ouvrière comme un progrès important.

Analysis by Lequenne (1998, 98) suggests a more significant increase, estimating that the membership of the PCI rose from 200 in 1944 to 700 in 1948. Jean-René Chauvin, who was a member of the central committee of the PCI and its administrative secretary, recounts[124] that according to his archives the PCI membership in January 1948 was 626. One commentator describes this period as 'un âge d'or' for the PCI (Nick 2002, 340). In November 1946, for example, the PCI felt strong enough to present 121 candidates for the legislative elections in eleven *départements*, though they only polled 59,000 votes or 1.5 per cent of the total votes cast (Lazar 2003). However, one candidate in the Val d'Oise, Yvan Craipeau, obtained 14,152 votes and came second by only 300 votes to a candidate from the Radical Party (Craipeau 1999, 147). An internal organisational bulletin for branch secretaries from March 1947 gives an interesting picture of the PCI at the time. Acknowledging that the PCI was 'une organisation de petits bourgeois' the bulletin described the membership as being made up of 'ouvriers 32%, paysans 2,4%, employés 16%, fonctionnaires 22%[125], étudiants 9,2%, divers 18,4%' (PCI 1947a, 4). The average age of members was 28 and only 18 per cent were women. Importantly, 72 per cent were active in trade unions and 16 per cent had been elected to a representative role in their union. Agitation and intervention within unions was seen as an essential task for

[124] Interview with the author 25 October 2005.
[125] 12 per cent were primary school teachers.

each militant in the PCI, who should attempt to become 'le meilleur défenseur de toutes les revendications de son atelier et de son usine' (PCI 1947a, 4). Admitting that the period leading up to and after the Renault strike had created many opportunities for them to grow, the PCI leadership was however initially dissatisfied with the lack of progress that they had made, stating in a report presented at the fourth PCI congress[126] that 'notre influence dans la vie ouvrière française avoisine le zéro' (PCI 1947d, 2). The report went on to pose the question of why the PCI had not been able to successfully recruit factory workers during the upsurge in industrial disputes and militancy which had followed the Renault strike.[127] Criticisms over the PCF tactics during the disputes and the consequent disunity within the CGT had both contributed to demoralisation within the workers' movement, with the result according to the PCI that:

> La défiance des travailleurs et surtout les ouvriers vis-à-vis du trotskysme est toujours très grande … De plus, la démoralisation se traduit souvent, chez l'ouvrier écœuré du stalinisme, par le dégoût de tous les partis politiques (PCI 1947d, 2).

The lack of success was also put down to on-going disunity within the PCI itself which had led to tactical and organisational mistakes being made by the party. The bulletin, does however, later claim that 'le parti lui-même s'est renforcé' inside some factories (PCI 1947d, 7) and this positive note is continued the following month in a post-congress internal bulletin:

> Les grandes luttes ouvrières de l'année écoulée et surtout celles qui ont été ouvertes par la grève Renault, accompagnées du débordement des directions traîtres par de larges

[126] This had taken place in November 1947.
[127] They only attracted 3 new members from the Renault factory (PCI 1947b, 7).

> masses, ont créé des possibilités de développement du Parti comme jamais l'organisation Trotskyste en France n'en a connues (PCI 1947f, 1).

Similarly, in its weekly bulletin to members, it was claimed that '[d]ans chaque usine notre influence a grandi considérablement' (PCI 1947g, 3) and that they had been able to attract members from the PCF and SFIO towards their position. The article in the bulletin concluded with a comment from a PCF member in the Chausson factory who stated '[m]aintenant que j'ai vu les trotskystes à l'œuvre, je leur tire mon chapeau' (PCI 1947g, 3). The PCI, buoyed up by what it saw as increased support for its political position, set itself the aim of building a mass revolutionary party.[128] That it was ultimately unsuccessful in this endeavour was due in no small part to a reappearance of its own internal divisions[129] and a consequent inability to compete with the PCF, who from the second half of 1947 and the onset of the Cold War took up a more militant and overtly left-wing stance. By March 1950 PCI membership had fallen back to only 253 (Hentzgen 2006, 19).

The UC for their part, did not have a widespread national organisation and their few members were confined mainly to the Paris region. They were, however, convinced that they had built up a considerable amount of support amongst rank-and-file workers disenchanted with the politics of the PCF within the CGT in the Renault factory. Indeed, the role the 12 UC members played in the strike is considered by one non-Trotskyist writer to be 'un succès éclatant pour le groupuscule trotskistes' (Koch 1999, 20). As a result, Bois and his supporters

[128] Indeed the conservative press were already convinced that this was the case. For example *France-Soir* on the 22 June 1947 ran a headline claiming that there were 'cent cinquante mille trotskistes en région parisienne' (Nick 2002, 342).
[129] Mirroring and influenced by those in the Fourth International.

formed the *Syndicat démocratique Renault* (SDR) in July 1947 in the hope of attracting the most active and militant workers in the factory away from the CGT. Furthermore, they dissolved the UC group and merged it into the SDR. Stressing the importance of members being an 'active minority', reminiscent of the *minorité agissante* advocated by Monatte over twenty five years earlier, the breakaway union failed to grow to the extent originally envisaged by the UC. Indeed, it did not even attract the most active and militant members from the former Strike Committee (Renard 1947), the majority of whom decided to remain in the CGT. For the UC the failure to increase its membership meant that by 1950 the organisation, to all intents and purposes, ceased to exist. This lack of success was recognised by one of the original founders of the UC, David Korner who, writing several years later using the pseudonym 'Barta', noted:

> Le contraste était complet entre l'audience considérable que rencontraient nos mots d'ordre quand il s'agissait de salaires et de revendications et l'indifférence, sinon l'hostilité, quand il s'agissait de notre politique antiraciste, anticolonialiste internationaliste. Voilà la raison essentielle pour laquelle nos forces, de la grève à la disparition de l'organisation, ne sont ni augmentées ni renouvelées: l'arbre prolétarien rejetait en fin de compte la greffe révolutionnaire (Barta 1972).

Nevertheless, Minguet and Bois had each successfully managed, though not without difficulties at times, to build united action in their workplaces through adapting the united front tactic in a manner which was applicable to their own workplaces and best suited their circumstances. They were able to create a level of support for their ideas by putting forward demands and establishing common aims which had a resonance with rank-and-file workers. That workers were

prepared to take industrial action in pursuance of these aims had created a sense of optimism amongst the Trotskyist parties who considered that support for their wider political views was increasing. Minguet's approach, albeit determined by her Trotskyist politics, was based upon gaining support as a result of her resolute and focused union militancy. As part of an organisation that worked clandestinely until 1946, she could not therefore initially be overtly seen to be a Trotskysist. Bois on the other hand, while also considered to be an experienced union activist, stressed at all times his Trotskyist affiliation. He built up support through his overt political criticism of the PCF leadership of the CGT. His criticisms at that time corresponded with the disaffection felt by many workers with regards to their union leaderships. Both Minguet and Bois were able to use the tactic in order to unite workers and where possible their organisations, in a defensive struggle for definite and limited aims, irrespective of the profound political differences that existed between them on other issues. Focusing upon building active participation amongst rank-and-file workers, the use of the united front tactic in both cases did not depend on the involvement or the explicit agreement of union or political party leaderships. Great prominence in both examples was placed upon direct democracy and decision making in workers' committees of one sort or another and a consequent stress upon the accurate representation and transmission of workers' demands from the base upwards. In doing so, they attempted to highlight what they claimed to be the inadequacies, lack of support from and contradictions in both the politics of the PCF and the official union bureaucracies.

In the case studies examined in this chapter, the united fronts in which the Trotskyists Minguet and Bois played leading roles, took the form of local committees organised by rank-and-file workers. The committees performed distinct functions according to the precise objectives that each went on to establish for itself. While these were varied in detail they all, at least in the first instance, were concerned with workplace-related issues around wages, jobs and conditions. In addition, Minguet and Bois attempted at times to use the support they had in these committees for the pursuance of wider, more overtly political aims which highlighted what they saw as the failings and inadequacies of the existing union structures and workers' parties, especially that of the PCF. In determining the effectiveness of the united front as a tactic in these two instances, consideration has to be given to both short term and longer term evaluations.

Given the particular circumstances of the time, Minguet and Bois deemed that the most appropriate way to apply the united front tactic was through the means of the workers' committees. From a strategic point of view this implied that they should be the most ardent and militant activists involved in the daily, workplace and industrial struggles facing themselves and other workers in their factories. This was consistent with the position advocated by the Communist International in 1920 which called on revolutionaries to be 'the most resolute leaders' (Riddell 2008, 23) in the everyday struggle of workers to defend their wages and living conditions. The committees were seen as the most effective way to do this and as a result win workers to support unity in struggle. Through involving the widest possible layer of workers in such struggles they aimed to achieve another more

longer term goal, that of raising workers' consciousness of the need to join the Trotskyist organisations in the struggle to overthrow capitalism.

This chapter has demonstrated how, through their effective application of the united front tactic, the Trotskyists were successful for the most part in winning industrial disputes relating to localised campaigns and short-term objectives. Their forces were too small, however, to be able to have a permanent influence upon the national policies of the CGT or PCF and at no point were these two organisations prepared at a leadership level to enter into any type of alliance with the Trotskyists. How effective the use of the tactic was in enabling them to achieve their longer term aims related to raising 'class consciousness' amongst fellow workers and changing their political attitudes is more problematic. Through involvement in militancy in the workplace or trade union, workers can raise radical or even revolutionary possibilities for change, but these are then contradicted by prevailing attitudes surrounding what is reasonable, feasible or desirable. As Marx noted in 1845:

> The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch those of the ruling ideas, i.e. the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force (Marx 1845).

The economic and industrial struggles pursued through the use of differing forms of workers' committees acting as united fronts were only one component of the revolutionary strategy employed by Trotskyists and indeed, Minguet and Bois can be considered to have been effective and successful in this aspect. As has been noted earlier, though, in this study, the intention of revolutionary socialists

is to also use united fronts as a means of being able to convince workers to break with reformist ideas. The PCI and UC considered that [class] struggle was the most effective way to do this. But as Lenin maintained, however successful workers were through their own efforts in winning industrial struggles, they would:

> develop only trade union consciousness, i.e., the conviction that it is necessary to combine in unions, fight the employers, and strive to compel the government to pass necessary labour legislation (Lenin 1901).

In order to convince workers to break with their previously held views a united front of workers on its own was not enough. It was necessary for activists to build and be organised into mass revolutionary parties. It is regarding this additional aspect of the application of the united front tactic that Minguet and Bois were less effective.

Viewed in the short term, therefore, the united fronts and actions initiated by Minguet and Bois can, nevertheless, be considered to have been successful. However, over the longer term they were unable to arrest the continued decline in influence of Trotskyism amongst the mass of French workers. Between 1944 and 1948, despite the optimism noted above, the relative strength of the Trotskyists and other left opponents of the PCF was less than it had been in 1936 and this was set to decline even further. That of the PCF on the other hand was reaching its apogee. It had control both locally and nationally within the CGT and this was reinforced after the split creating the CGT-FO. By comparison, any agitation by Trotskyists was only going to find an echo amongst a small number of workers. Thus, calls by the Trotskyist parties to the leaders of other workers'

parties and union organisations for united activity, was ignored. Indeed, even after the relative success for the Trotskyists of the Renault strike, a SDR bulletin from January 1949 clearly recognised this situation. 'A notre proposition de front unique les cégétistes n'ont pas répondu' (UC 1995, 207). They consequently became confined to the margins of the trade union movement and mainly limited to making demands for the reunification of the CGT and CGT-FO, along with other more abstract calls for workers' unity. Trotskyists found it impossible to organise openly or agitate inside the CGT. It became increasingly impossible even for the best trade union activist to build any type of united front action without the prior approval of the PCF. This eventually led many, especially those from the UC, to leave and join FO or the CFTC, or to remain as clandestine individuals within the CGT unions. The danger of course was that the more the Trotskyists decreased in number and became confined to the periphery of the union movement, the fewer opportunities there were to build united fronts in which they would have any influence. 'The bigger the revolutionary force, the greater the united front possibilities' (Hallas 1975, 8). Indeed, as Hentzgen notes, '[à] partir de 1947, le front unique préconisé par le PCI est purement propagandiste vu sa faiblesse numérique' (2006,17). Some isolated individuals did manage to be elected to union leadership positions during the subsequent period, but this was in the main as a result of their proficiency as union activists and not due to any overt political agitation. Nevertheless in doing so the united front tactic was not forgotten and remained uppermost in their approach to activity inside workplaces and the trade unions. The challenge was to adapt it to new and different circumstances and certainly ones which were not 'of their own choosing' (Marx 1852). Some examples of this ability to adapt to changing

circumstances by activists originating from the Trotstkyist tradition are discussed in the following chapter.

Chapter Five

Coordinations: a modern form of united front?

The previous chapter considered the role that Trotskyists played while participating in united fronts in two factories situated in the Paris region during the years immediately following the end of World War 2. In both cases examined, the united fronts took the form of relatively small scale workers' committees which were for the most part confined to their immediate localities. The second example however, at the Renault factory, did produce outcomes that had a resonance at a national level. This chapter will consider case studies of united fronts taken from the ten years between 1985 and 1995, several of which also had an impact nationally and involved the participation of large numbers of workers. As a result they occasionally took a form different to that of the 'classical' united fronts discussed in earlier chapters. The case studies and their impact will be considered through the extensive use of contemporary press reports and political documents, as well as academic studies. An assessment as to the effectiveness or otherwise of these new forms of united front will be made, together with an examination of the involvement and influence of Trotskyists within them.

After spending nearly two decades on the margins of both the trade union and political landscapes, the events throughout the world during 1968, of which the student protests and the general strike in France were the most obvious, provided an impetus which led to a revival of the French far left.

Over the following years this allowed Trotskyists in particular to reach out to a new and enlarged audience for their ideas. As Perry remarks with regard to one key industrial sector:

> After 1968 industrial relations in the car industry were transformed – as studies of Citroën, Peugeot and Renault confirm. For about five years the revolutionary left was able to gain a hearing in some car plants. Hostility to management sharpened (Perry 2008, 60).

Although still a very small minority during this period, their role however was often decisive, with them becoming catalysts for and diffusers of 'l'insubordination' (Vigna 2008, 322). Nick notes that the Trotskyist groups became more widely recognised and experienced a resurgence following the events of 1968. 'En six ans, les organisations trotskistes sont passées de quelques dizaines de membres à plusieurs milliers' (2002, 488). However, by the end of the 1970s their numbers and influence suffered another decline and did not begin to increase again until well into the following decade. Following the break up of the Soviet block after 1989 and the subsequent decline in the fortunes of the PCF, Trotskyism in France experienced another renewal. Trotskyist candidates in local, regional and national elections for example, began to achieve results in double figures, a phenomenon never previously seen. Furthermore their ability to secure key positions at all levels in trade unions and wider social movements allowed them to play a much more influential, though not necessarily determining role.

This chapter consequently examines how Trotskyists played a role in the building of rank-and-file workers' organisations and new forms of united front, particularly in the period after the mid-1980s, known as *coordinations.* Their experience in these bodies also allowed them to play a significant part in the establishment and development of alternative trade unions in the early 1990s such as *Le Groupe des Dix (Solidaires).* These organisations, according to Pernot (1996, 11), promote and 'appellent au pouvoir de la base, à la réduction de la distance entre le sommet et les sections, à la recherche de l'unité et au primat de l'action directe'. I maintain that both the *coordinations* and autonomous unions are in practice united fronts, their form being an adaptation to particular circumstances. Moreover, I assert that in contrast to the major union confederations, the autonomous unions, with their greater emphasis upon grass-roots solidarity, unity and rank-and-file democracy, have progressed beyond simply being what Trotsky deemed to be undeveloped forms of the united front (Trotsky1932b). Furthermore, I remark how Trotskyists also played significant roles in the development of a variety of wider social movements, many of which can function as types of united front organisations.

The chapter first of all considers the meaning of the term *coordination.* I suggest that, as variants of the united front, *coordinations* can be seen as a continuity of previous forms of workers' self-organisation dating back to the nineteenth century and compare several contemporary attempts at defining the precise nature of the term. In order to fully appreciate the role played by Trotskyists militants in both these and the wider social movements, I next consider the condition of the main Trotskyist groups during the period concerned. I then note

also, how involvement in earlier attempts at *autogestion* by some of these organisations was a precursor to the later building of the *coordination* movement.

This is followed by examples of *coordinations* from 1986 to 1989 involving, amongst others, students, railway workers, primary school teachers, nurses and postal workers. I then examine the specific role played by Trotskyists in the development of the different *coordinations* highlighted.

As we will see, the *coordinations* established by the nurses and postal workers led directly to the formation of two autonomous unions, SUD-SANTĒ and SUD-PTT and an examination of these forms the next section of the chapter. I then look at the industrial unrest which occurred at the end of 1995 and examine how the CGT in particular incorporated the use of *coordinations* into their interventions.

In conclusion, I ascertain how effective the *coordinations* were as united fronts and assess the role played in them by Trotskyists. I ask whether they have contributed to the resurgence of radical left-wing activism observed in a range of social movements during and after the 1990s.

A contemporary adaptation

As *coordinations* came to prominence at the time of the industrial unrest in the second half of the 1980s, some commentators referred to them as if they were a relatively recent innovation. In contrast, others have argued that they were an adaptation of an organisational method that workers had been using since at least

the mid-nineteenth century. Indeed, as Dufour (2001) states, '[l]es coordinations, ce n'est pas un phénomène nouveau, c'est l'histoire permanente du syndicalisme.' Similarly, Kouvélakis notes that the rise of *coordinations* 'signait le grand retour de l'auto-organisation des mobilisations populaires' (Kouvélakis 2007, 192). This recognition that *coordinations* had their origins in earlier forms of autonomous workers' organisations had also previously been noted by Denis:

> Elles [coordinations] procèdent d'une longue tradition, remontant à l'aube du mouvement ouvrier, fondée sur l'auto-organisation des luttes. Les coordinations ne sont pas, en effet, les premiers mouvements d'auto-organisation à avoir dépossédé les organisations syndicales de leur monopole de la mobilisation (Denis 1996, 23).

The willingness by sections of workers to take matters into their own hands and utilize 'unofficial' forms of industrial action is seen by Bensaïd as:

> La renaissance, sous le choc de la crise, d'un syndicalisme combatif … Ce syndicalisme tend à renouer avec les traditions originelles du syndicalisme révolutionnaire et des Bourses du travail, antérieures à l'institutionnalisation du syndicalisme d'entreprise dans le cadre du compromis keynésien (Bensaïd 2000, 188).

I support the notion that *coordinations* are a modern variation of earlier forms of workers' organisation. Moreover, I maintain that they can in fact be defined as united fronts, in that they facilitate autonomous rank-and-file participation by workers in the pursuance of common objectives, without the restrictions imposed upon them by the established trade union or political structures. By their very nature *coordinations*, just like all other united fronts, can in practice take a variety of forms. But, while the particularities and details of each may be

different, they are all characterised by the emphasis they place upon workers' self organisation and an active, participatory democracy. Furthermore, they are usually temporary, springing up in order to campaign over a specific grievance and have in most cases taken the form of horizontal 'bottom up' organisational structures reminiscent of Proudhonism[130], which attempt to both transcend and surmount barriers and divisions between existing workers' organisations and indeed bring into activity those workers who have no affiliation at all to any association.

Mass meetings of workers or *assemblées générales* are a common characteristic of all *coordinations* (Aguiton and Bensaïd 1997, 74) and provide a direct means for the expression of different issues and points of view. At the same time they are also the bodies which according to Hassenteufel (1991, 7) give democratic legitimacy to workers' representatives and most often determine the direction taken by the *coordination*.

In attempting to define precisely what *coordinations* are, it is important to note that they display characteristics which stress independence of action, autonomy and democracy, all of which could be applied to other social movements. With this in mind, however, one attempt at a definition of what is meant by *coordinations* is as follows:

> Une coordination peut être définie comme une forme d'organisation temporaire, faisant son apparition au cours de périodes de mobilisation sociale, et se donnant pour fonction d'organiser et de représenter, si possible sur le plan national, des personnes appartenant à

[130] Relating to the ideas of mutualism and federalism developed by the anarchist theoretician Pierre Joseph Proudhon (1809-1865).

> une même catégorie socioprofessionnelle en vue d'une action collective. Toutes les coordinations se sont jusqu'à maintenant présentées comme des structures assurant l'unité des acteurs mobilisés par-delà les tendances politiques ou syndicales (Leschi 1996).

But this definition confines itself to a movement which focuses on workers in a single sector, workplace or profession. *Coordinations* have also been created which straddle these different areas and have brought together workers from a variety of sectors and thus for a short while have been able to effectively substitute themselves for the union confederations. So a fuller definition must also include this element. In both cases, however, the desire for direct democracy and unity between workers regardless of political or union affiliation has been the prime consideration of its participants. A further defining feature of c*oordinations*, therefore, is that unlike most trade unions they are characterised by having few, if any, permanent hierarchical representative structures and indeed elected spokespersons or representatives are invariably subject to immediate recall, daily reaffirmation of their role and the possibility of revocation of their mandates at any time. As a result, *coordinations* are also distinguished by a virtual 'interaction constante' (Denis 1996, 21) between its different members and constituent components. As Hassenteufel notes:

> Les pratiques représentatives des coordinations sont caractérisées, en particulier par les acteurs eux-mêmes, par l'expression de « démocratie directe » qui sous-entend le rapport direct entre représentés et représentants, opposé au rapport médiatisé de la représentation politique et syndicale (en général) (Hassenteufel 1991, 6).

The Italian political philosopher Negri in his writing about *coordinations* recognises and highlights this particular aspect and when combined with the other non-hierarchical components described above sees in *coordinations* elements of a paradigm for a future society. The struggles undertaken by *coordinations*, he maintains, of necessity pose the question of political power; indeed this is a question which is central to their very existence:

> La lutte des coordinations est une lutte qui se situe d'emblée au niveau du pouvoir et qui se pose donc comme problème la direction de la gestion globale de l'économie. Les luttes des coordinations, et la forme politique de l'organisation des coordinations, sont des luttes et des formes d'organisation d'emblée communistes, au sens où ce sont des luttes pour la direction du mécanisme global de développement, pour la réappropriation de classe de celui-ci. Elles constituent tout à la fois des indications sur comment gérer l'économie et l'État, la production et la reproduction de manière radicalement démocratique (Negri 1994).

In a similar vein Lazzarato (2004) sees the development of *coordinations* as the simultaneous breaking down of what is negative or intolerable about existing organisational structures, for example, hegemony of existing political parties within the trades union movement, the possible construction of new forms of industrial action, and an organisation of society which has an emphasis on creativity and experimentation from below. *Coordinations* should not, he maintains, be seen merely as a 'collective' but a

> cartographie des singularités, composée d'une multiplicité de commissions, d'initiatives, de lieux de discussion et d'élaboration, de militants politiques et syndicaux, d'une multiplicité de métiers et de professions, de réseaux d'amitiés, d'affinités « culturelles et

> artistiques » qui se font et se défont avec des vitesses et des finalités différentes (Lazzarato 2004, 108).

The key organisational form of *coordinations* for Lazzarato is that of the 'network.' This organisational method he sees as one which is receptive to minority ideas and one which allows all participants to learn and to take part in political action. Nevertheless, such ideas need to be agreed upon by majority voting through mass meetings. The networks he describes are constantly evolving and transforming themselves through the actions of the different interest groups without ever creating or selecting 'des élites et des structures verticales, directives et permanentes'(Lazzarato 2004, 110). Similarly to Negri he is opposed to the domination of *coordinations* by the traditional workers' organisations; indeed he claims that their hegemony is incompatible with *coordinations* (ibid 2004, 112). However, he does see a place for them because '[s]eule la coordination constitue un espace public inclusive des différences' (ibid 2004, 113). Indeed he would expect them to be a component of any *coordination* provided that they conformed to its constitutive principles. This thus creates a dilemma, for while allowing workers' political parties such as those established by Trotskyists to participate and organise inside a *coordination* they would only be able do so if they were prepared to compromise to an extent their own political independence. As has already been noted earlier in this study, independence of political action and identity is a defining feature of participation in united front activity for Trotskyists. If an organisation does not allow them to maintain this independence can it be considered to be a united front and should they take part in it?

In certain situations workers may 'spontaneously' unite and begin to organise themselves in defence of their wages or conditions or to demand changes and improvements. It is not uncommon for such actions to be initiated by workers with little or no activist expertise. But after the initial actions, the driving force for the further development of *coordinations* has invariably come with the assistance of experienced union activists and militants. 'Il s'agit généralement de délégués du personnel ou de militants de base proches des salariés' (Denis 1996, 71). By the time of the emergence of the *coordinations* examined in this chapter, a significant number of these militants and activists were or had been closely associated with Trotskyism.

The re-emergence of Trotskyism.

The three most noteworthy remaining Trotskyist currents by the middle of the 1970s were *Lutte ouvrière* (LO), *l'Organisation communiste internationaliste* (OCI) and the *Ligue communiste révolutionnaire* (LCR). They had their respective roots in the following earlier organisations: *L'Union communiste, l'Organisation communiste internationaliste*[131], *le Parti communiste internationaliste*[132]. The latter two were previously united in 1944 in the PCI. Of the three, the LCR proved to be, over the long term, the most adaptable and responsive to both the developments of modern capitalism and the consequent changing composition of the working class. This adaptability enabled it by the end of the 1990s to attract rank-and-file activists from other social movements as well as trade unionists. The other two organisations remained wedded to what they saw as versions of 'orthodox' Trotskyism, leading them on occasions to

[131] Also known as the Lambertiste current.
[132] Also known as the Pabloist current.

taking positions highly critical of the LCR and refusing to engage with it in united actions on an 'official' or national level.

Throughout the period in question, OCI and LO frequently took what was known as a 'workerist' standpoint, in which the focus of their activities was centered almost in its entirety on those they considered to be authentic members of the working class, those employed in blue-collar factory work. This meant that when mass protest movements and struggles occurred over issues other than those directly related to the workplace, such as around women's rights and anti-racism, they were not able to respond in a way that attracted wider layers of activists to their organisations. Moreover in the case of LO this was compounded by their seemingly closed and secretive organisational structure and unwillingness to intervene in workplaces where they did not have members. According to Bourseiller, LO still has a unique method of operating, with prospective adherents for example having to go through the equivalent of a probationary period and demonstrate their suitability for membership:

> Ce groupe pratique l'action à la base et privilégie un enracinement sociologique dans la classe ouvrière. On est ici face à des professionnels de la révolution qui refusent de se gargariser de slogans, mais poursuivent inlassablement leur travail de fourmi (Bourseiller 2007, 81).

Similarly, another writer remarks how LO have largely kept the same internal organisational policies as were first adopted in 1943, when by necessity they had to operate as a clandestine organisation. This resulted in a situation whereby 'le (la) militant(e) doit consacrer toutes ses ressources à l'organisation, devenant

un(e) révolutionnaire de profession. Le parcours militant fait donc l'objet d'un modus operandi codifié et stable' (Ubbiali 2002, 58). This has certainly led to a situation where LO members have been seen as highly active and efficient militants in workplace struggles. But they have arguably limited their understanding and especially their application of the united front to this somewhat restricted range of circumstances and even in these situations they have tended to refuse to create alliances with those white-collar workers they consider to be part of the bourgeoisie.

Before 1968 the OCI was considered to be the most important component of French Trotskyism. It continued to grow throughout the 1970s and in the following decade it attracted at various times an estimated 5000 – 10 000 members (Cosseron 2007, 183), many more incidentally than either the LCR or LO, and thus making it the largest group on the far left.

The transformation of the political and economic situation into a revolutionary breakthrough that many of these groups were hoping for during the 1970s did not occur, and in reality the influence of Trotskyists, at least on national events, still remained negligible. This was due in no small part to the near permanent state of dissent and even acrimony which existed at times within and between them, resulting in an inability to provide a united left alternative to the parliamentary left-wing parties. This was compounded by the growing attraction and strength of the *Parti socialiste* (PS) which culminated in the election of François Mitterrand as President of the Republic and the formation of a *Union de la Gauche* (PS-PCF) government in 1981. Despite having been one of the most vociferous

forces behind the radicalism expressed by many in the period prior to Mitterrand's success, in the immediate aftermath of the election Trotskyists were unable to take any significant advantage of the swing to the left in public opinion. According to one writer it was at this moment that '[l]es trotskistes touchent le fond' (Nick 2002, 546). They were not able to start substantially rebuilding themselves again until the mid-1980s when the expectations held by many on the left that Mitterrand would bring about profound social change proved to be unfounded. The exception to this was the OCI which in 1981 after having seen a huge increase in its membership the previous decade suffered a major split with one part joining the reformist *Parti socialiste unifié* (PSU) led by future Prime Minister and PS First Secretary Michel Rocard, and the remainder forming a new *Parti communiste internationaliste* (PCI) which itself by 1986 had hemorrhaged into 3 rival factions. The result was that the *Lambertistes* suffered a decline from which they have yet (2011) to recover.

Despite an atmosphere of radicalism pervading many aspects of French society during the decade following 1968 it nevertheless continued to be difficult for Trotskyists to agitate openly inside the CGT, dominated as it was by the PCF. Of the three Trotskyist organisations, LO was initially 'l'organisation la plus solidement implantée dans les usines' (Vigna 2008, 282). Even so, LO members would often have to hide their Trotskyist credentials in order to maintain a presence inside the CGT. It was not uncommon for OCI and LO members to be excluded from the confederation. In these cases they would invariably join FO which still maintained a firm anti-Communist stance. Equally, given their own inflexible 'anti-Stalinist' positions, the OCI and to lesser extent LO would often

focus their efforts in any case on work inside FO (and the PS) instead of the CGT. The tactic used by the OCI in particular was to use a form of less concealed entrism[133] - unlike the *entrism sui generis* used by the followers of Michel Pablo[134] in the 1950s - in an attempt to gain influential or leadership positions inside the unions of the FO[135] confederation:

> La place singulière de la CGT-FO, considérée, à partir de 1983 comme le seul syndicat encore indépendant dans lequel ses militants étaient tolérés, amena le PCI [OCI] à y investir l'essentiel de ses militants syndiqués (Brandley 2001, 90).

This brought some success, but often at the expense of building up an active organisation of rank-and-file militants at the base of the unions. The strategy, emphasising the ability of individual militants to obtain positions within the union bureaucracy has precedents and similarities to that promoted by both Monatte and the revolutionary syndicalists immediately after the First World War and to some extent that of Bois and the the *Union communiste*, after the 1947 Renault strike. Both stressed the need for a *minorité clairvoyante* or active minority of militants rather than for the dynamic involvement of the mass of workers or trade unionists in a united front. Individual OCI members saw themselves as an advanced guard aiming to gain access to positions within the union apparatus as a substitute for mobilizing into action or involving the mass of union members. A danger of such a strategy, from the point of view of entrists, is that individuals become separated from those whom they are meant to represent. The host organisation and the individuals' position within it becomes

[133] Militants joining FO did not hide their Trotskyist membership.
[134] Secretary of the Fourth International in 1952.
[135] They used a similar strategy inside the PS.

increasingly attractive, leading to them becoming assimilated and incorporated into the very structures that they are trying to change. This is indeed what happened to many OCI members who eventually found themselves abandoning revolutionary politics for comfortable positions within the FO or PS organisations (Le Goff 2004). Indeed a former general secretary of FO, Marc Blondel, while defining himself as 'rebelle et solitaire' (Andolfatto 2004, 36), made no secret of his friendship with Pierre Lambert, the leader of OCI, and the support this Trotskyist organisation gave him throughout his trade union career. Using similar tactics they also established a significant position inside the independent *Fédération de l'éducation nationale* (FEN)[136] and the student union UNEF.

The LCR and *autogestion*

The *Ligue communiste*, on the other hand, while also finding interventions inside the CGT problematic, devoted much of its energies to working inside the CFDT which at this time was promoting itself as a radical alternative to the CGT. One of the key policies of the CFDT, which members of the *Ligue communiste* found particularly attractive and saw as a means by which they could apply the united front tactic was that of *autogestion*. I maintain that the experience Trotskyists gained participating in the *autogestion* campaigns contributed to their later successful involvement in the *coordinations* during the 1980s. Though never clearly defined, the concept was associated with ideas of self-management and workers' control of production, though not necessarily workers' ownership of the means of production. The term was first used in the mid-1960s and the CFDT

[136] OCI member and historian Jean-Jacques Marie was an influential activist inside this union.

used it in circulars to members during the 1968 strikes. It eventually became official policy following the CFDT conference in 1970. According to Gilcher-Holley (1998, 265), the CFDT held *autogestion* to mean:

- Reforms in the management and decision making structures of business and industry.
- Reduction of hierarchies and the concentration of power.
- Opportunities for workers to release their creative potential through self determination and self administration.

The CGT, in contrast, did not see *autogestion* as a step towards fundamental social change, seeing it simply as one which altered power and decision making but not something that could lead to the redistribution of wealth in society.

The largest mainstream political party supporting the idea of *autogestion* at the time was the PSU[137]. It was accompanied by other elements of the non-Stalinist left, including *l'Alliance marxiste révolutionnaire* (AMR)[138] and the *Ligue communiste* who saw in the *autogestion* movement a means to promote united fronts based on the grass-roots mobilisation of workers into active *autogestion* groups which could eventually be 'united in a network with a nationwide coordination based on a democratic model' (Gilcher-Holley 1998, 268). However, the *Ligue communiste* at this time found that its audience continued to be more associated with and confined to students and intellectuals. It was thus

[137] The PSU was formed in 1960 as an alternative to both the SFIO and the PCF attracting dissidents from both parties, in particular those who were opposed to the war in Algeria. It also included Trotskyists amongst its membership.
[138] The AMR were formed from a group of Pabloists who broke from the 4th International in 1964. They were firm advocates of *autogestion* and became part of the PSU in 1974.

increasingly unable to sustain any substantial influence amongst blue collar or manual workers. Indeed its tactic of mobilizing students and provoking street fights with the far right and police did little to attract ordinary workers from their daily struggles, and was in fact to provide the justification for the government to ban it and arrest its best known activists, including Alain Krivine, in June 1973 (Krivine 2006, 140-144). The ambiguity about the precise meaning given to *autogestion* meant that it could be utilized by a wide spectrum of political organisations. '*Autogestion* was a concept vague enough to blur the distinctions between reform and revolution' (Perry 2008, 63). Ultimately the direction of the *autogestion* movement was to become determined by the non-revolutionary left, including the PSU, Catholic trade union organisations and the PS, who later omitted the idea from their programme when they became part of the *Union de la Gauche* government.

The prevalence of the notion of a*utogestion* reached its apogee, at least in practical terms in 1973, during the conflict at the LIP watch factory in Besançon.[139] In response to threats of sackings and secret management plans to close the factory, workers occupied the buildings and for several months took control of both the production process and the sale of the watches produced. The conflict was to become a *cause célèbre*, popularised by the slogan '*C'est possible, on fabrique, on vend, on se paie*'[140] and eventually received support and backing from many sections of the French trade union movement.

[139] Other documented attempts at *autogestion* occurred at Pédernec in Brittany (1973), PIL in Cerizay (1974) and at the Talbot factory in Poissy (1983).
[140] As written on a banner in the factory during the occupation and seen in the documentary film: *Les LIP, l'imagination au pouvoir*. (2007), Film. Directed by Christian Rouaud. France: Pierre Grise distribution.

Having had the goal of bringing together workers from different unions and political persuasions in order to struggle for common objectives, it is possible to consider the attempts at *autogestion* to be forms of united fronts. In practice, however, the stress on anti-authoritarian and anti-hierarchical values in the movement, combined with the near constant mobilisation of all concerned led to much instability and an unwillingness or inability to create any coherent organisational structures which would have been able to coordinate the activities of the different groups. Despite its eventual demise[141] and failure to produce any long term alteration to the fundamental structures, ownership and authority in industry or society at large, the *autogestion* movement did provide another example of the desire and willingness of sections of French workers to engage in autonomous rank-and-file activity. It also enabled a generation of Trotskyists, especially from the LCR, to gain valuable experience of building united fronts and organising in workplaces in a manner which had previously been inaccessible to them.

As noted earlier, the success of Mitterrand marked the closing stages of an initial period of revival in the fortunes of Trotskyism. Its re-emergence had reached a crucial moment and it had become clear to the LCR, at least, that in order to progress any further they needed a much firmer implantation amongst workers and inside the trade union movement. Nick (2002, 497) estimates that the LCR at this time was 'laminée, épuisée, ruinée', with only 570 fully-active members. At its fifth congress in December 1981 the party claimed that 'the principal organisational task of the party was to generalise the turn towards industry so as

[141] A second unsuccessful attempt at *autogestion* in the LIP factory occurred in May 1976.

to gain more influence in the organised labour movement' (Alexander 1991, 396). The experience gained by LCR members during the *autogestion* campaigns was a key factor leading to this change of direction. Fractions of the party, such as that led by Jean-René Chauvin[142] who had been arguing since 1974 about the need to create active united fronts with the 'reformists' in the trade union movement, became more significant. As a result, the LCR began to give a much greater focus to its interventions amongst industrial workers and within the trade unions. LCR militants became increasingly prominent in the CGT and also managed to become a noticeably active minority inside the CFDT. Many activists were therefore in a position to significantly contribute to the building of *coordinations* during the industrial disputes of the 1980s. In addition, this willingness to search for unity with non-revolutionaries also enabled the LCR to play an increasingly active part in the later wider social movements and developing *sans* organisations, as they came to be called (Mouchard 2002).

Coordinations: from 1986 to 1989

Unity in action between revolutionary and non-revolutionary trade unionists was one of the defining characteristics of the *coordinations*, which flowered during the industrial disputes arising in the mid-1980s. These arose at a time when many workers in France had become disillusioned and disappointed with the lack of substantial radical reforms from the Socialist government during the first period of the Mitterrand presidency. The arrival of the *Parti socialiste* into government in 1981 had given rise to expectations of a more equal society and was also seen by some as heralding the beginning of a more consensual approach to industrial

[142] Interviewed by the author 25 October 2005.

relations with a greater incorporation of workers' organisations, union leaders and officials into the various negotiating and representative bodies. By 1982, however, the effects of continued growing support for neo-liberal economic philosophies within the PS had started to put this consensus at risk, ultimately forcing the party to adopt overtly conservative economic and social policies. The PS accepted the argument that the increasing cost to the French State of the various welfare benefits put inordinate strains on the national economy and thus threatened the rate of profit for the whole of French industry. In order to offset the costs to industry, the Socialist government led by Pierre Mauroy introduced austerity measures and made radical reductions to the full range of previously enjoyed social security and welfare benefits. As a consequence, there occurred a sharp increase in social unrest and strike action taken by workers, followed in March 1986 by the election of a conservative government led by Jacques Chirac (Hewlett 1988, 74).

The French trade union movement, however, had entered a period of crisis (Mouriaux 1998) which had arisen as a result of several factors, most notably a continuing frustration with the perceived lack of democracy and effective rank-and-file representation within the unions. This was a particular concern, though not exclusively, for the PCF-controlled CGT. 'La pratique de la démocratie syndicale est indéniablement à améliorer pour éviter que trop souvent des délégués syndicaux se transforment en fonctionnaires, à mille lieues des préoccupations immédiates de leurs mandants' (Noblecourt, *Le Monde*, 4 January 1987). Furthermore, a level of demoralisation existed amongst some workers due to what was perceived to be a lack of opposition from the CGT and

CFDT to the austerity measures imposed during the different Socialist administrations. In the minds of some, both union confederations were too closely allied with the political parties in power and thus unwilling to organise any overtly political opposition to them. A reflection of this dissatisfaction was seen in a continued marked decline in trade union membership. In addition, disenchantment with the unions was compounded by their later inability to provide a unified opposition when faced with the extension of free market ideologies and policies promoted by conservative governments and in particular that of Jacques Chirac between March 1986 and May 1988.

Almost immediately after its formation, the Chirac government announced a series of deregulations and privatisations of public enterprises, of which some, such as Paribas and Saint-Gobain, had only recently been taken under state ownership by the preceding Socialist government. On the industrial front opposition was growing to the continued cutbacks and sacrifices demanded of the workforce. This opened up a period seen by two commentators as being characterised by 'grèves de la rigueur inégalement répartie' (Béroud and Mouriaux 1997, 15). The number of strikes in France during the 1980s had been falling since a peak in 1982 when 2.4 million days were lost[143] due to strike action. Dropping further in 1985 to 1.2 million days, it rose again to 1.8m during 'le réveil de 1986' (Mouriaux 2004, 89) reaching a peak in 1989 with 3.2 million days lost.

[143] Ministère de l'Emploi et de la Solidarité: Direction de l'animation de la recherche des études et des statistiques (DARES), Annuaire Statistique de la France 2000. Ed. INSEE.

Surprisingly, however, the catalyst which provoked the first important and wide-scale outbreak of social unrest during this period and was to later provide inspiration for others, originated from a proposal in 1986 to restructure the universities by introducing a system of entry selection for prospective students. The proposed university changes caused outrage amongst both school and university students, leading to demonstrations, protests and street fighting during the months of November and December 1986. In the course of one of the clashes between students and the CRS riot police one student, Malik Oussékine was killed. This in turn provoked a response in the form of a mass demonstration in central Paris numbering half a million people. As a result of the protests the reform was shelved and Devaquet, the minister responsible for its inception, resigned.

The leadership and organisation of the student protests and strikes was through what developed into the student *coordination*, a method of auto-organisation already used in the 1970s by students, particularly those close to the LCR. As discussed above, the *coordinations* differed from the traditional union structures in that they were a more spontaneous, transient, directly accountable and less hierarchical method of organisation. Membership was open to all concerned, regardless of existing union or political affiliation. The decision-making process was from the base upwards, usually determined through the means of mass-meetings. Those elected as spokespersons or to leadership positions could be recalled and replaced at any time. The new *coordination* was to be the first of many such bodies to be established as industrial disputes became more frequent over the next decade, culminating in the strike movement of December 1995.

Support for the protest movement against the proposed modifications came from a wide spectrum of students, many of whom had not previously been active in any of the student unions. These organisations individually were unable to respond to the level of dissatisfaction amongst the student body. In contrast, the non-sectarian nature of the *coordination,* as described above, enabled confirmed union activists and importantly those students who were not affiliated to any union organisation to work and orchestrate their actions together.

The shelving of the University reorganisation proposals by the government, following the mass protest actions taken by the student *coordination*, was seen as a sign of weakness. As a consequence, workers in a series of industries were encouraged to put forward demands for wage increases and improvements to their working conditions:

> Capitalisant tout ce qui alimente le mécontentement des salariés, les centrales auraient pu espérer s'engouffrer dans la brèche ouverte par un mouvement étudiant qui avait montré qu'il était possible de faire reculer un gouvernement (Noblecourt, *Le Monde*, 4 January 1987).

The following section of this chapter examines six instances when workers established *coordinations* in order to pursue their demands in defence of wages and working conditions. I then consider the involvement of Trotskyists in these united fronts.

The first of group of workers to take action following that of the students, were national railway workers on the 19 December 1986, joined in solidarity a week later by the Parisian transport workers of the RATP. They were demanding the withdrawal of a proposal by the SNCF management to impose a wage structure based on 'merit'. This was to replace the existing system established on experience or length of service. Furthermore, it was felt to unfairly benefit the supervisory staff at the expense of those workers who actually carried out the work, particularly the drivers. The CFDT union confederation launched the action and this was followed reluctantly by the CGT and FO. However, the palpable divisions between the union leaderships on the issue, combined with their perceived moderation, led to a feeling of frustration amongst many railway workers with their unions. In the final week of December, two *coordinations* were formed with the intention of spreading and intensifying the strike action rather than limiting it - as the official union leaderships preferred - to single strike days.

The catalyst for the creation of the *coordinations* and the spreading of the movement controlled by rank-and-file workers came from a leaflet written and distributed by a young non-unionised train driver based at the Paris Nord station. 'Ce tract, tiré à une cinquantaine d'exemplaires seulement, circule sur les machines, passe de main en main. Des photocopies pénètrent dans les dépôts et les foyers. Lu, commenté, il rencontre un grand écho' (Dauvel 2006). The strike, controlled and organised by local strike committees and *assemblées générales* (AG), under the auspices of the *coordinations,* managed to close 93 out of the 94 railway depots in the country. In some depots up to 80 per cent of the strikers

were non-unionised but were nevertheless, supporters of the *coordinations* (Lebaube, *Le Monde*, 7 January 1987). The two *coordinations,* the *Coordination nationale des agents de conduite* (CNAC) and the *Coordination nationale intercatégories des cheminots* (CNIC) based their actions on directly elected and revocable strike committees, with mass meetings being the sovereign decision making bodies. In some respect the existence of the two *coordinations* was a weakness. The CNAC only concerned itself with drivers' demands while the CNIC was open to any railway worker, no matter what their role. Furthermore, when it came to negotiations with the management the CNAC declined to take part, saying that it was the prerogative of the unions. The CNIC on the other hand stated that rank-and-file representatives from the *coordination* should be present during all negotiations. This difference led to the CFDT leadership being prepared to accommodate and recognise the CNAC but not the CNIC. The CGT for its part was hostile throughout the dispute to both of the unofficial organisations, but was put in the position of having to support the strikers' demands. In what could be considered to be a sign of panic, Prime Minister Jacques Chirac raised the spectre of a Communist threat to society:

> Le Parti communiste, la CGT ont pris les choses en main et ont engagé une action tendant à attaquer directement la politique du gouvernement et, d'ailleurs, à attaquer par là même, comme ils le font depuis un certain temps, la politique des gouvernements précédents. C'est une action politique, que la CGT communiste a engagée (*Le Monde,* 8 January 1987).

The CGT countered this by calling for an extension of the strike movement into the rest of the public sector, aware that the strikers did have the support of much

of public opinion. For its part the CFDT called for a return to work and FO made statements about the danger of allowing the dispute to continue. The divisions amongst the unions were evident once again. The strike came to an end after 26 days, the longest strike in the history of the SNCF; the management agreed to withdraw their proposal to change the wage structure, however none of the other demands of the strikers such as those concerning wage increases, changing working practices or classification of jobs were won. Most workers, especially those belonging to the CGT, saw the result as a defeat.

Following the railway workers' strike, the next two cases of workers creating *coordinations* while taking industrial action, were those formed by primary school teachers in January 1987 and workers in the aeronautical engineering firm SNECMA during the first quarter of 1988. The primary teachers demanded the withdrawal of a proposal by the conservative Minister for Education, René Monory, to replace teacher-qualified primary school head teachers[144] with administrators who had specific management and administration backgrounds without necessarily having any teaching experience or qualifications. The SNECMA workers, especially those on the lowest pay scales, were demanding a 1500 franc pay rise for all.

They both formed *coordinations* in order to pursue their demands. The primary teachers did so because the official union bodies SNI-PEGC and SGEN-CFDT to a large extent ignored or refused to take on board their concerns and the SNECMA workers because, despite having initially put forward the 1500 franc

[144] *maîtres-directeurs*

wage demand, the union organisation in the firm was ineffective. Indeed, when some of the strikers went to demonstrate at the Citroën car factory, attempting to bring the car workers out on strike in solidarity, it was, according to an article written by C-F Jullien in *Le Nouvel Observateur* (6 May 1988, 115), denounced by their own CGT branch as an 'opération irresponsable'. Both groups of workers, however, were unable to bring together large enough numbers of their fellow workers into the *coordinations* in order to successfully pursue their initial demands. For the primary teachers this numerical weakness - the *coordination* only managed to win support from 10 per cent of the profession - was also compounded by the refusal of the official unions to mobilise sufficiently in their support. In the case of the SNECMA dispute, which lasted for ten weeks and was the hardest fought dispute in the history of the firm up until that time, the workforce were in effect divided into four groups; the *coordination*, a strike committee which, like the *coordination,* attracted both unionized and non unionized workers and the two union confederations CGT and CFDT. While workers were not restricted to participation in only one of the organisations, backing for the first two bodies came essentially from younger, less well-paid workers. The older, better-paid and more experienced and qualified workers tended to follow the directives of the established union apparatus and not participate within the *coordination*. Neither *coordinations* were able to achieve their demands and the disputes ended in defeat for the workers involved.

By the latter half of 1988, industrial unrest was continuing to grow throughout different sectors of French industry. Disputes and strikes took place in the electricity industry, the Paris Metro and even amongst prison warders. But the

next groups of workers to create *coordinations* in order to support their strike movements were nurses, Air France workers and postal delivery drivers. The dispute in the postal service was to have far-reaching ramifications for the French trade union movement and is examined later. At the time, however, it was the nurses' dispute which was uppermost in the media and this case provides the fourth example in this chapter of a significant *coordination*.

According to one journalist, '[d]ans l'importante grève des infirmières, une coordination nationale a joué un rôle dominant' (Noblecourt, *Le Monde*, 4 November 1988). Denis (Denis 1996, 175) claims that the *coordination* movement reached its apogee with that of the nurses. United by the slogan heard frequently during their protests *Ni nonnes, ni bonnes, ni connes* (Charvet 2008), the nurses' *coordination* at its height was able to mobilise into strike action three quarters of all hospital nurses in the country (Chevandier 2007, 2). The dispute was provoked by government proposals aimed at resolving the problem of the shortage of nurses in the French health service. These proposed abolishing the requirement for entrants to nursing training to have a minimum qualification of the school leaving certificate (*baccalauréat*) and also to have successfully passed appropriate entrance examinations. Nurses saw this as a demeaning of their profession and a non recognition of their competences and status. This, combined with an already ongoing unhappiness with low salaries and excessive workload, led to an explosion of anger in hospitals, uniting nurses throughout the country.

Only 7 per cent of nurses were in trade unions, indeed the majority of nurses did not consider the unions to be able to meet their specific needs (Poisson &

Thibault 1989, 92). The establishment of a *coordination,* initially formed in the Paris region and based on the experiences of the students and railway workers, was able to effectively unite the profession. The strike organised on the 6 October 1988 by the *coordination* was so successful that it brought together 90 per cent of nurses in Paris and 80 per cent of those from the provinces (Denis 1996, 172). Incidentally, it was following this successful strike that other hospital workers in turn began to form a general health workers' *coordination* which aimed to include medical, paramedical and non-medical staff in its ranks. Two days later a national congress of the nurses' *coordination* brought together delegates from over 84 different towns and cities. This conference agreed to continue strike action and impose a 'work to rule' whereby nurses refused to carry out any administrative work that was not immediately in the interest of patients or of a medical nature sanctioned by doctors. In this way they were able to maintain and even increase the support that they had built up with the general public. The government, on the other hand, did not officially recognise the nurses' *coordination*, claiming that it was nothing other than a Trotskyist conspiracy and that it was 'difficile de négocier avec les assistants de M. Krivine' (*Le Monde*, 26 October 1988) and so attempted to divide the movement by only opening negotiations with the unions. The CGT refused to be party to this (Chevandier 2007, 2) and as a result gained credibility and support from amongst the nurses.

After a 100,000-strong demonstration by hospital workers on the 13 October the government agreed to include the nurses' *coordination* in negotiations. Proposals made by the government were repeatedly rejected by the CGT and the

assemblées générales organised by the *coordination*, but an agreement was eventually accepted and signed by the CFDT and FO. These two organisations had denounced the intransigence of both of the *coordinations* in the hospitals, which had by now essentially assimilated into one organisation, as well as the CGT, and were anxious to end the dispute. The agreement awarded the nurses a wage increase, gave recognition of their professional status and maintained the academic standards required to enter the profession. But the resulting return to work from 23 October onwards was sporadic and discontent remained. This resulted in further industrial action taking place in the hospitals the following year.

When the nurses went back to work after their dispute they were the only group of workers to have maintained their *coordination* as a permanent organisation (Chombeau, *Le Monde*, 8 November 1988). Elsewhere, their purpose had been to coordinate industrial struggles over limited objectives, essentially in order to compensate for the weakness of any official union presence or the unwillingness of the union machinery to engage in industrial action. As channels for rank-and-file militancy they proved extremely efficient but once the short term goals of particular disputes had been resolved, the unions were able to re-establish their positions usually without great difficulty. This was not the case in the hospitals. The trade unions CGT and CFDT had only ever represented a relatively small percentage of hospital workers. The *coordination* on the other hand was seen as the organisation which most accurately represented the majority of hospital workers over a range of issues and had been successful in winning the recent dispute. The most active militants in the *coordination* were nevertheless also

union members, the majority being members of CFDT-Santé and they were largely based in the Parisian regional sections. As we shall see later in this chapter, these militants were eventually suspended and then expelled from their union for having opposed the official union policy.

As noted above, postal workers were also at this time on strike. The strike was in opposition to government proposals to drastically transform the PTT into two distinct businesses, *La Poste* and *France Télécom*. Known as the Quilès proposals, named after the minister responsible for the PTT, they were intended to become law by 1990 and were seen as a precursor to the full privatisation of the postal and telecommunications service. They formed part of the wholesale modernisation programme for the public sector devised by the Socialist government of Michel Rocard. The proposals were also designed to gradually abolish the civil service status of PTT personnel and thus remove the perceived employment advantages and protection that this entailed.

The first group to take strike action, on 8 October, were the sorting office workers who were joined two weeks later by the delivery lorry and van drivers. It was this second group, traditionally very few of whom were union members, which proved to be the most active and militant. In what became known as the 'yellow vans conflict'[145] (*Le Monde*, 8 November 1988), after the colour of the postal vans, the strike lasted until the thirteenth of November. Following the example of the nurses and hospital workers, 240 van drivers, serving the Paris sorting offices, voted at a mass meeting, for strike action and to form a

[145] Still referred to as the ' conflit des camions jaunes'

coordination, which became known as 'la coordination Keller' (Chemin, *Le Monde*, 11 November 1988) after the name of the principal garage depot of the drivers. The *coordination* also included sorting office workers and involved non-unionised postal workers, as well as members of both the CGT and CFDT:

> Chez nous, il y a des militants CGT, des militants CFDT et des non-syndiqués, explique l'un des responsables du moment. C'est tout simplement ça notre secret : on ne passe pas notre temps à se reprocher des trahisons qui remontent à dix ans. Ici, on a tous la même corde au cou (Chemin, *Le Monde*, 11 November 1988).

Similarly to the health workers and nurses' *coordination*, the most active members in the postal workers' *coordination* were also CFDT members. The *coordination* debated and sanctioned militant direct action by the drivers, such as the barricading of post offices and sorting offices with vans and lorries. At times, the drivers 'lost' the keys or immobilised their vehicles in other ways. The national CFDT leadership, on the other hand, opposed such actions and refused to accord any legitimacy to the *coordination* ensuring that it was not involved in any negotiations with the PTT management or government. On the seventh of November, without consulting any local sections of the CFDT, the national leadership agreed a compromise and called for a return to work. The *coordination* refused to abide by this decision, 64 per cent of drivers voting against a return to work (*Le Monde*, 11 November 1988). It was at this point that the CFDT-PTT secretary Desrayaud called upon Quilès to 'prendre toutes ses responsabilités' and 'faire respecter les libertés fondamentales' (Coupé and Marchand 1998, 19). It is claimed by some commentators (Sionneau 2008) that such a call was invitation to the police to use force against picketing CFDT

postal workers. This is indeed what happened on the thirteenth of November when the police, army and private contractors removed the barricades of immobilsed vans and lorries from in front of PTT buildings. Despite this heavy-handed response by the authorities, the government, as a result of the strike, was constrained to delay the implementation of the Quilès proposals until 1991. The drivers and other postal workers thus returned to work having achieved, at least in the short term, a successful outcome to the strike.

In defiance of the CFDT leadership, left-wing CFDT-PTT militants and activists in the *coordination* and from other sectors of the postal service, had publicly campaigned against the leadership decisions throughout the strike and in particular after the 7 November call to return to work. As with the activists from CFDT-Santé, this continued campaigning and non-cooperation with the national leadership was ultimately to lead to their expulsion from the confederation. One consequence of these expulsions from the CFDT postal and health unions was the creation of two new 'autonomous' unions examined later in this chapter.

The strikes during the autumn of 1988 involved not only nurses, hospital and postal workers but also social workers, tax officials, workers in the electricity industry, Parisian transport workers and even prison warders. But these strikes were an exception, an atypical peak to the general downward trend since 1968 in days lost due to strike action. There had been other peaks in 1976, 1979 and 1982, but due to economic recession the general tendency was one of decline, as can be seen from the chart below.

Figure 1. Strike Statistics for France 1969-1994

(Source: Ministère de l'Emploi et de la Solidarité. (DARES et DGAFP.) Annuaire Statistique de la France 2000. Ed. INSEE.)

The most notable strike occurring in the early 1990s and the last one to produce a significant *coordination*, was that of Air France baggage handlers, maintenance and ground-staff in October 1993. The government had announced a restructuring plan for the company which included cutting wage costs and making 4000 people redundant. Without waiting for any guidance from the unions, workers at Roissy (Charles de Gaulle) airport organised themselves into a *coordination*, bringing together all those who worked for the company, including pilots and air hostesses. A decision to strike was taken and the *coordination* was able to rapidly spread the strike throughout the airport and also to Orly airport. Militant action, including the occupation of runways, quickly forced the government to back down and delay their reorganisation plans.

The divide between the union hierarchy and sections of their rank-and-file membership, increasingly frustrated by the 'realist' and what they deemed to be

the conciliatory attitude taken by the leaderships, had been growing throughout the 1980s and especially so since the upsurge in militancy seen in the industrial action taken by the various *coordinations*. As an instrument of industrial struggle the *coordinations* challenged the ability of trade union bureaucracies to lead and control strikes, protests and industrial action by workers. As a form of united front, the *coordinations* gave Trotskyists the opportunity to intervene in workplace struggles and demonstrate that, in their view 'reformist' solutions could only at best be a temporary reprieve in the defence of economic, political or social rights or freedoms. Through challenging the trade union bureaucracies and promoting workers' self-organisation, the Trotskyists attempted to influence workers and convince them of the need for a 'revolutionary' solution. As will be seen later in this chapter, they were able to achieve some measure of success in this endeavour.

Arguably, the influence of revolutionaries in the CFDT unions was a significant contributory factor in generating the intense rift that existed between the union leaderships and militant rank-and-file members. Such an influence and consequent divisions were not as apparent in the CGT unions, due in part to the continuing near hegemony of the PCF, which in itself was to prove to be a cause for concern over the next period. The divisions inside the CFDT eventually led to suspensions and expulsions, one direct result of which was the development, examined in the next section of this chapter, from 1989 onwards of a number of more avowedly radical and autonomous unions. Many of these joined the *Solidaires*[146] confederation of autonomous unions and designated themselves part

[146] The *G10 Solidaires* confederation of the most radical autonomous unions, founded in 1981.

of the SUD category of unions. These unions, it will be argued, can also, at times, provide an opening for Trotskyists to effectively employ the united front tactic. By the time of the next major outbreak of industrial unrest, during the late autumn of 1995, other than the formation of the SUD unions, another major adaptation made by the trade union movement in France was the building and effective use of *coordinations* officially sanctioned by the trade union leaderships.

The formation of the SUD unions.

At the November 1988 conference of the CFDT in Strasbourg, the departing general secretary of the union Edmond Maire, who had once spoken of the need to overthrow capitalism (Hewlett 1998,161), called for the left-wing opposition and in particular that of the Parisian region, to be expelled. He argued that the Parisian regional sections of the union were under the influence of the far left and, in direct opposition to official policy, had been primarily responsible for the creation of the nurses' and postal workers' *coordinations*. The left wing within the CFDT had also denounced the public sector wage agreement signed by the leadership and the government. This agreement, the opposition argued, would lead to deterioration in the standard of living and loss of purchasing power for all public sector workers.

Finding themselves in a minority and unable to successfully defend their positions at the conference, their mandates as union representatives were subsequently suspended by the union leadership. On returning to their local union offices in Paris the militant CFDT-PTT activists found that all the locks on

the doors had been changed and that they were denied entry (Delanglade 1998, 42). By December 1988 they were given the option of towing the leadership line or being expelled. Wishing to uphold their principles they chose the latter course of action. The CFDT leadership then expelled 'des syndicats entiers dans les PTT et dans la santé, tout simplement pour sanctionner leur conception démocratique de la lutte' (Aguiton and Bensaid 1997, 80).

At that time the PTT nationally had a workforce of over 500,000 people. Those expelled from the CFDT counted no more than 1000. (Aguiton and Bensaid 1997, 149). After their expulsion from the CFDT many of these militants took the decision to create a new union in the PTT. Called SUD-PTT, its name was derived from the principles the founding activists held to be fundamental in the workers' movement: solidarity, unity and democracy (*Solidaire, Unitaire, Démocratique*). Seeing itself as a workers' organisation prepared to contest the established order, its founding charter commits the union to not only defend and improve the wages and conditions of its members in common with other unions, but also to ultimately work for a total transformation of society and a 'rupture profonde avec la logique capitaliste' (SUD-PTT 1999)[147]. The new union has since progressed to be the second most representative trade union in the postal sector behind the CGT but ahead of the CFDT.[148]

The CFDT national leadership also claimed that the local leaders of health workers and nurses in the Paris region were dominated by Trotskyists from the

[147] This is a direct reference back to the *Charte d'Amiens,* first adopted by the CGT in 1906.
[148] According to the elections to the official consultative bodies in *La Poste* and *France Télécom* , the *Commissions administratives paritaires* (CAP) and *Commission consultative paritaire* (CCP). Source: SUD-PTT. Sud PTT - Activités postales - Actualités [accessed 10 May 2011]

LCR (Herzlich, *Le Monde*, 2 December 1988), who were 'particulièrement actifs' (Chombeau, *Le Monde*, 22 October). Following the November congress they decided to suspend these officials from the union under the pretext that according to the national union leadership, the Parisian officials had prioritised activity within the *coordination* rather than support the official CFDT position. Furthermore, the national officials claimed, with some justification, that the Parisians had unconstitutionally made available to the *coordination* office space, resources and facilities belonging to the union.

At the beginning of March, the CFDT national executive voted to permanently exclude the twelve Paris CFDT health unions. Determined to maintain a presence inside the hospitals, activists from the excluded unions decided, on the 1 April 1989, to establish a new regional union federation based on the organisation and principles of the *coordination* (*Le Monde,* 5 April 1989), The new organisation took the name CRC (*Coordonner, Rassembler, Construire*). With few financial resources it was dependent in the first instance on support from like-minded militants in SUD-PTT. 'Les camarades de SUD-PTT en nous donnant la possibilité de disposer d'un local officiel, ont largement contribué à notre survie et au développement des CRC' (SUD Mondor 2009). However, the CRC did manage to increase its size and influence, albeit less spectacularly than SUD-PTT. The following year, the CRC became a national organisation, later changing its name to *SUD Santé-Sociaux*[149] and joining the *Solidaires* group of autonomous unions.

[149] Then later to *SUD Santé.*

Having a federalist structure, a collegiate leadership and without a permanent general secretary, *SUD Santé-Sociaux* stresses the importance of participatory democracy, collective action and grass-roots militancy. It has unsurprisingly therefore attracted activists from the far left and 'souvent à la mouvance trotskiste de la LCR' (Andolfatto 2004, 78).

1995: *Coordinations* officially sanctioned.

The final example of the use of *coordinations* by workers examined in this chapter is taken from the period of industrial and social conflict which took place during the late autumn 1995.

The first half of the 1990s in France was marked by ongoing economic recession which resulted in dramatic increases in unemployment[150]. Governments, of both left and right, attempted to respond to this crisis by introducing austerity measures designed to limit state expenditure through cutting elements of the welfare state, such as social benefits. This was coupled with programmes of industrial restructuring which included the privatisation of state controlled or nationalised industries. Mounting anger and frustration at government policies resulted in widespread public support for the industrial and social conflicts that took place during November and December 1995 in opposition to the 'Juppé plan.'[151] Described as 'France's hot December' (Harman 1996), it took the

[150] Reaching a peak of just over 12 per cent of the active population in 1993 (La Documentation Française, 2001).

[151] Reforms proposed by the then Prime Minister Alain Juppé aimed at reducing the budget deficit so as to meet the requirements for entry into the European single monetary union in 1997. The 'plan' involved a series of changes to the social security system which affected all workers but in particular those in the public sector. They included increasing the number of years public sector employers had to work before being entitled to their retirement pensions from 37.5 to 40 (a measure already imposed on private sector workers in 1993). Further proposals aimed at

political establishment by surprise and was the most significant eruption of worker militancy, and industrial conflict seen in France since 1968.

The unions, however, were divided on the issue, with the CFDT leadership supporting the Juppé proposals, while FO and the CGT along with the smaller autonomous unions vehemently opposed them. Nevertheless, for several weeks over 2 million public sector workers took strike action, bringing cities throughout France to a virtual standstill. Frequent mass demonstrations throughout the country involved hundreds of thousands of people, not only from the public sector, but also including substantial numbers of strike delegations from the private sector.

The strikes, initially called for and organised by the trade union leaderships, very quickly began to break away from the confines of the official union procedures as rank-and-file trade unionists started to organise themselves independently, making links with other trade unionists and even non-unionised workers once again through means of *coordinations* and workplace mass meetings. Impromptu and unofficial mass meetings took place as activists spontaneously attempted to spread the strikes from one workplace to another.

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increasing health insurance contributions for pensioners and the unemployed, increasing hospital charges, making restrictions on prescriptions, freezing and taxing the benefits paid to low income families with children. Furthermore the government proposed taking control of the health insurance system away from joint union-management bodies and putting it directly in the hands of the State. Juppé had a month earlier frozen public sector wages. Additional proposals announced the 'rationalisation' of the SNCF, the partial privatisation of the telephone service and by implication that of other industries in the public sector.

Another notable characteristic of the strikes and *coordinations*, was that unlike those of the late 1980s, these were often interprofessional (Aguiton and Bensaïd 1997, 117), simultaneously involving workers in many different sectors. The slogan "Tous ensemble!" was shouted and heard almost everywhere throughout the period. This insistence on unity in struggle effectively produced united fronts in workplaces which eradicated, temporarily at least, many of the divisions previously existing between workers, whether these were on the basis of industry, trade union or even political affiliation. This was exemplified clearly from the end of November during the mass street demonstrations which saw workers marching under joint union banners and not in separate contingents as had traditionally occurred in the past. 'Les banderoles unitaires d'entreprise et d'établissements ont remplacé souvent les banderoles par syndicats, témoignant ainsi de la volonté des grévistes d'agir ensemble' (Vakaloulis 1998, 33).

It was not uncommon in the mass meetings and *coordinations,* to see workers from different industries and sectors debating issues of common concern. One newspaper report described how railway workers[152] from different unions debated, at an improvised *assemblée générale,* the absolute necessity of spreading the strike to other workplaces and industries:

> Les cheminots appellent à la solidarité, « La SNCF et la RATP, ce n'est pas suffisant, il faut La Poste, EDF. On peut gagner mais il faut du monde. On va paralyser l'économie. Il faut aller dans les boîtes, expliquer aux gens » (*Le Monde* 30 November 1995).

[152] The first, and arguably the most determined and militant strikers, were the railway workers of the SNCF and the Parisian transport network, the RATP.

CGT militants from the railways (Ribeill 1997) instigated the mass meetings, strike votes and moves to pull out other workers from the postal, telephone and power industries. Kail (1996, 451) cites the example of the Malakoff Paris Transport depot on the outskirts of the city. Five hundred and fifty seven transport workers were based here and of these only 92 were in a union. But during the period of their continuous strike from 27 November to 20 December they were supported and joined by another 326 workers from the depot making in total 75 per cent of the workforce. These workers in many cases were the driving force behind the workplace *assemblées générales* in which 'la parole de la base devient première' (Leschi 1997, 503). At the height of the strikes such meetings were held on a daily basis and used to vote on the next steps to be taken.

However, the majority of strikes were eventually controlled and organised by trade union officials. The CGT, in particular, incorporating and encouraging the use of *coordinations* and *assemblées générales* into its strategy.[153] Indeed, the CGT was able to assimilate grass-roots activism 'de façon plus ou moins organique, dans sa démarche, du moins lorsqu'il a cherché à construire effectivement la mobilisation' (Kouvélakis 2007, 194).

With the confederations, especially the CGT, promoting strikes and at the same time embracing elements of rank-and-file worker democracy in a way not seen

[153] As noted by philosopher Paul Thibault, a supporter of the Juppé plans, in a debate with political scientist Luc Ferry, an opponent of the plans. 'Les syndicats se sont conduits comme des coordinations, c'est-à-dire qu'ils ont laissé la base, les assemblées générales décider' (Le Point 12 December 1995, 42).

for decades[154] there was not the same necessity or urgency for workers to organise independent *coordinations* as an alternative to the union leaderships. According to one researcher, they no longer challenged 'directement le rôle des syndicats, elles procéderaient d'un retour du syndicalisme' (Leschi 1997, 499). The strike movement was gathering pace at such a speed anyway, that it would have been difficult for the union bureaucracies to do anything other than support grass-roots industrial action and organisation. Where *coordinations* were formed in order to spread the strikes across or between different industries they were invariably officially sanctioned. Undeniably the strength of feeling amongst ordinary workers made it virtually impossible anyway for the unions to oppose their creation. As Mouriaux and Subileau note:

> Immergés dans le conflit, les syndicats l'ont animé sans lui dicter une ligne de conduite pré-determinée. Ils se comportent en porte-parole d'un verbe énoncé directement par les syndiqués et les non-syndiqués, mandatés par des décisions collectives (1996, 303).

The lack of or need for independent *coordinations* was, according to Christophe Aguiton,[155] also a result of the eventual public unity, as noted previously, between the CGT and FO confederations, who he maintains were in effect forming a 'front syndical' (Aguiton and Bensaid 1997, 119). Nevertheless, it still tended to be rank-and-file activists who took on the responsibility for, and organisation of, the widening and development of the strikes: Indeed the movement as a whole was 'driven largely from below' (Wolfreys 2006, 4).

[154] Albeit as a means whereby the unions could maintain some control or at the very least ensure a measure of influence.
[155] A founder member of SUD-PTT

Wanting to reassert their influence however, the FO and CGT leaderships agreed on the 21 December to enter into a *Sommet social*[156] with the government. This decision effectively brought the movement to a close and signalled a return to work, much to the dissatisfaction of numbers of rank-and-file workers:

> Le sommet social a été à la fin pour le gouvernement et pour les syndicats, l'occasion de remettre en marche la machine de gestion économique, disons-le, ce sommet social ne satisfaisant pas la base et les minorités actives des syndicats (Pons 1996, 32).

The final result of negotiations, announced just before Christmas, was not a total victory for the trade unions and workers' movement, but Juppé was nonetheless obliged to abandon his plans to increase the contributory years necessary before public sector workers could retire and similarly he was unable to immediately push through his restructuring of the SNCF. However, he did manage to achieve his other reforms to the social security system, bringing it entirely under government control and increasing taxes and national insurance contributions.

A stimulus for the creation of the earliest *coordinations* was invariably the perceived inability of the existing trade union confederations to respond quickly enough to shop-floor demands. In addition, from the point of view of the rank and file workers, neither did they accurately and genuinely represent their viewpoint nor allow adequate forums for the expression of their demands. As a result the official trade union machinery was bypassed as workers sought another means to pursue their demands. This was certainly the case in the first

[156] Viannet, the CGT general secretary, had in fact been in secret negotiations with the government for at least ten days before the summit (Service France 1995).

coordinations established after 1986, but by the following years, responding to the demands of rank-and-file workers, union officials were increasingly involved in the development of *coordinations*. Furthermore, Georges Marchais, the PCF General Secretary at the time stated that:

> Nous sommes pour le socialisme autogestionnaire, nous sommes donc pour que les gens s'unissent, se rassemblent et prennent en main leurs propres affaires. C'est ce qui se fait dans les coordinations (*L'Humanité*, 14 October 1988).

By 1990, the CGT in particular, began to view the use of *assemblées générales* as a positive means through which to engage with a younger layer of militants and at the same time effectively combine both the individual and collective aspirations of workers (Hassenteufel 1991, 19). Such moves by the official union machinery were viewed at times with suspicion by some activists, as can be seen from the comments made by two Trotskyist writers and activists:

> On a également vu, devant le succès de la forme « coordination », des directions syndicales se déguiser en coordinations pour lancer une initiative de boutique, la « coordination », qui n'a plus de tel que le nom, est alors plutôt une « cooptation », où des responsables syndicaux s'adjoignent des travailleurs choisis ou dosés par eux, en dehors de toute procédure authentiquement démocratique (Aguiton and Bensaïd 1997, 77).

The events of November to December 1995 were considered to be a turning point for the French labour movement. Caillé and Le Goff (1996) suggest that the industrial unrest can be seen as a watershed or *tournant*, which in turn radicalised significant sections of the population. This was to have a marked effect upon

social and industrial relations in France over the subsequent period, which came to be characterised by a resurgence of worker protest and militancy. According to Desbrousses and Peloille, '[l]e mouvement a marqué dans la conscience des gens, on est en train de mettre un frein à la pensée unique, on commence à lui donner de sacrés coups' (Desbrousses and Peloille 1997, 131). Other writers go further, suggesting that: '[p]lus fondamentalement, ce qui commençait à être discuté au sein des mobilisations, c'était la question de savoir « dans quelle société nous vivons et nous voulons vivre »' (Béroud, Mouriaux and Vakaloulis 1998, 106).

How much of this resurgence can be attributed to the effective use of the united front tactic by Trotskyists is examined in the following section of this chapter.

Trotskyist involvement in the *coordinations*.

A significant number of activists in the *coordinations* were either associated with Trotskyists from the LCR or LO (Denis 1996, 72) or aligned with other components of the far left. The resulting *coordinations* nevertheless only rarely espoused as a body any overt specific political ideology other than to oppose or overturn government plans or reforms. Indeed, independence from politics and reference back to the *Charte d'Amiens*[157] was on occasion used to justify this position. They have nevertheless undoubtedly played a 'political' role but cannot be considered to be political parties, certainly in the sense that would be accepted by Leninists or Trotskyists. The rapid growth over a relatively short period of time of particular *coordinations* and the involvement of large numbers of

[157] See Appendix 2, *La Charte d'Amiens*

workers from varying backgrounds meant that Trotskyists, even though they played key roles in them were confined to the role of an 'active minority.' Though no more significantly numerous than they had been ten years previously; Trotskyists involved in the *coordinations* were on the whole far more experienced in workplace militancy and organisation than ever before (Aguiton and Bensaid 1997, 73). This activism resulted in Trotskyists being elected as representatives in numerous *coordinations*. 'Dans beaucoup de ces coordinations en effet, en retrouve à l'initiative ou en position de porte-parole des militants d'extrême gauche (Rizet-Savoi 2006, 192). But the legacy of the hegemonic control of workers' organisations by the PCF meant that many of those involved in the *coordinations* were wary of 'toute manipulation par les groupes politiques ou syndicaux' (Hassenteufel 1991, 8). So in order to continue in these representative roles, LCR and LO members needed to achieve a balance between giving a political lead and being able to accurately represent and carry out the wishes of those who had elected them. Those activists unable to achieve this were in most cases 'bâillonnés par la masse' (Hassenteufel 1991, 8) and removed from their positions. On the other hand, Trotskyists who were capable of maintaining their political independence while avoiding sectarianism, at the same time as respecting the democratic procedures and majority decisions, were able to successfully agitate and apply the united front tactic within the *coordinations*.

The role played by Trotskyists during the 1986-1987 railway workers' strike was a topic of much debate; their influence was at times exaggerated by the conservative press (*Le Figaro*, 29 December 1986) in a similar fashion to that which occurred during the strikes at the time of 1936 Popular Front. However, it

was undoubtedly true that Trotskyist militants were able in many cases to play a crucial role in the growth in the *coordinations* (Lutte Ouvrière 1987). Many were relatively young, sceptical of the existing union confederations, and had previously gained experience of this type of united front activity from their involvement in the school student *coordinations* which had arisen at various times during the 1970s:

> Après avoir intégré les coordinations comme un instrument du répertoire d'action collective au cours des manifestations de la jeunesse scolarisée, les militants venus de ces mobilisations de la jeunesse ont continué à bousculer les modes d'action traditionnels des syndicats (Leschi 1996).

Historian of the railway workers and SNCF, Georges Ribeill, in an examination of the strike (1987), claims that 36 per cent of drivers involved in the CNAC were either members of the LCR or close supporters of the party. Furthermore, Ribeill shows that LO had a significant presence in the CNIC. This contention was also noted in a report in *Le Monde* which highlighted the role played by militants José Perez from the LCR and Daniel Vitry[158], a CFDT member from LO, in CNAC and CNIC respectively (Biffaud, *Le Monde*, 13 January 1987). Biffaud also related their success to the ongoing crisis within the French trade union movement, as has already been noted earlier in this chapter:

> La création de ces coordinations, dont des militants trotskistes ont pu tirer profit, a mis en évidence un phénomène beaucoup plus grave, la désaffection latente, ces dernières

[158] Vitry had been a full time regional official for the CFDT since 1982. During the railway workers' strike he was dismissed from his position (*Le Monde*, 11 July 1991) by the CFDT leadership who, according to an LO document, stated that ' puisque Daniel Vitry se voulait le représentant de la base, ils le remettaient à la base'.

années, à l'égard des syndicats et principalement de la CGT (Biffaud, *Le Monde*, 13 January 1987).

The same article claimed that the *Lambertistes* in the *Mouvement pour un parti des travailleurs* (MPPT)[159] supported neither of the two different *coordinations* as their very existence, they claimed, contributed to a continued division of the workers' movement, thus making the key element of unity in struggle all the more difficult to achieve. Effectively therefore, the MPPT played no role in the strikes. Indeed, an editorial in one of their publications called the *coordinations* nothing less than '[u]ne nouvelle arme de la bourgeoisie contre la classe ouvrière' (CCI 1989).

The militancy shown by the nurses' *coordination* two years later also led to much speculation in the media and apprehension amongst trade union leaderships about the role played by Trotskyist activists particularly those from the LCR. Other commentators, Poisson and Thibault (1989), claim that they were not the decisive element in the dispute. Prime time television news reports on the Antenne 2 channel for example investigated the level of Trotskyist involvement saying that 'en les entend beaucoup' and described how LCR militants had 'joué un rôle remarqué au sein de la coordination des infirmières, ce qui n'a été du goût ni du gouvernement ni des syndicats' (Antenne 2 1988). The news reporter interviewed LCR leader Alain Krivine, who explained that 'nous sommes plus à l'aise dans les luttes que dans les élections' and that he hoped LCR militants would be able to use their agitational and organisational competence in order to help the nurses achieve their aims. The important thing in the short term, he

[159] Formerly the OCI.

maintained, was to obtain wage increases and that ‘la revolution n’est pas à l’ordre du jour.’

Aware that industrial unrest was also taking place both in Social Security offices and the postal service (PTT), it was accepted by many that ‘les trotskistes cherchent partout à se servir de l'outil des coordinations’ (Noblecourt 1988). However, *Le Monde* (4 November 1988) questioned whether such actions could be considered to be a concerted Trotskyist ‘opération.’ Statements made by *Lutte ouvrière* leader Arlette Laguiller, such as ‘[n]ous devons, comme en 1974 au Crédit lyonnais, préparer nos comités de grève … nos propres organisations pour éviter les lâchages éventuels des syndicats’ *(Le Monde,* 4 November 1988) and articles from the LCR newspaper *Rouge* (20 October 1988) which asked: ‘comment allumer l'étincelle que tous les postiers reconnaîtront comme annonciatrice d'un mouvement profond et durable?’, did nothing to lessen this impression. It is certainly correct that the LCR had a few months earlier published a booklet discussing the relationship between itself and the trade union movement, with a chapter devoted to an analysis of the upsurge in *coordinations* which the LCR saw as a positive development in the light of, in their view, discredited union organisations (LCR 1988, 37-43). *Coordinations,* the LCR stated, were not simply a substitute or a replacement for the trade unions but a ‘forme d'organisation supérieure, quand la mobilisation atteint une phase supérieure’ (LCR 1988, 41) and provided a welcomed response to the three requirements needed for a successful workers’ struggle; unity, democracy and centralised coordination. All the established union confederations to a greater or lesser degree, the chapter continued, showed a level of reticence with regards to

any rank-and-file worker self-organisation which promoted these three requirements, whether this is in connection to mass meetings, strike committees or *coordinations.* Trotskyists, on the other hand, gave auto-organisation 'la plus grande importance', and argued that in order to prepare future large scale struggles, it was necessary to 'stimuler la prise en main par les travailleurs de leurs affaires' (LCR 1988, 43). But, as Krivine had stated in the television interview, revolution was not yet on the agenda, the 'phase supérieure' had not been reached and suggestions that a Trotskyist 'opération' was possible over-emphasised their strength and influence.

Despite the relatively small numbers of militants involved, the role played by the far left and LCR members in particular in all of the *coordinations* described above was nonetheless significant. In a study on the militancy of LCR members, Rizet-Savoi (2006) describes how the rise of *coordinations* after 1986 opened up many opportunities for agitation and interventions by LCR members. These activists, she states, were often the ones who took the initiative to propose the creation of *coordinations* or at the very least became spokespersons for them. Their past experience and networks of like-minded activists enabled them to quickly coordinate actions and resources:

> Les structures d'auto organisation que sont les coordinations de grévistes ne sont pas sans rapport avec les comités de grève ou les soviets de conception trotskiste. D'autre part, leur expérience importante déjà acquise sur le terrain des luttes sociales, et leurs carnets d'adresses militants, leur permettent de prendre une part active à leur développement (Rizet-Savoi 2006, 192).

It was this ability to have an active presence amongst workers whenever disputes arose and to be able to increasingly pose effective challenges to the existing trade union leaderships that led to more and more attacks being levelled against them from these leaderships. For their role during the nurses and postal workers strikes Trotskyist activists were, amongst other things, disparaged as *gréviculteurs* (*Le Monde*, 20 August 1988), and *moutons noirs* (Noblecourt, *Le Monde*, 9 December 1988) especially by CFDT leaders such as Edmond Maire (Coupé and Marchand 1998, 27). Their presence in the two disputes and involvement in both the nurses' and postal workers' *coordinations*, as examined earlier in this chapter, arguably led directly to the formation of the breakaway, autonomous new unions, SUD-PTT and SUD-Santé.

The period of crisis and decline that had affected the established trade union movement coupled with the activism and militancy of the *coordinations*, opened up new possibilities for the Trotskyists. Those activists who had remained in Trotskyist organisations since the late nineteen sixties and seventies had amassed a great deal of agitational and organisational expertise and experience which they were able put to use in both the *coordinations* and increasingly within the trade unions. From the late-1980s in particular, as the older generation of union activists and officials withdrew or retired from activity, Trotskyists began to be more frequently elected into vacated union positions, even inside the CGT:

> Mais lorsque la relève vient de manquer, ils (l'extrême gauche) décrochent parfois, malgré leur appartenance politique 'coupable' et parce qu'ils sont des militants expérimentés et souvent efficaces, des rôles qu'ils n'auraient jamais pu espérer quelques

années auparavant. L'étiolement progressif du PCF participe également à créer des possibilités nouvelles à la CGT (Rizet-Savoi 2006, 192).

It is worth noting that after 1989[160] the PCF took a gradually more receptive attitude towards those organisations to their left with whom they would not have previously worked. It is also clear that from this date the established union organisations were increasingly prepared to intervene in industrial disputes in association with *coordinations* and by 1995 had begun to encourage their formation.

Trotskyists had also taken part in the *coordinations* and *assemblées générales* during the industrial unrest in late-1995 and were heavily involved in most, if not all, of the mobilisations, protests and strikes (Brochier and Delouche 2000). Arguably, one consequence of this was the resurgence of political, social and trade union militancy seen in the ensuing period in which Trotskyists and others from the far left were also concerned. While the 1995 *coordinations* and *assemblées générales* did provide possibilities for Trotskyist militants to utilise their experiences as activists and allow them openings to propose other organisational forms for the workers' movement, a major characteristic of them, was that they were, for the most part, sanctioned and initiated by the trade union officials. The influence of revolutionaries in building the *coordinations* and effectively applying the united front tactic, is therefore, more difficult to determine than with those of the 1980s. Indeed, Harman (1996) argues, that while undoubtedly Trotskyist militants played an important, sometimes leading role in the strikes and were active in the mass meetings and *coordinations*, the

[160] Fall of the Berlin Wall.

two parties LO and LCR did not, or were unable to, use the opportunities brought about by the industrial conflict to engage in a political struggle which effectively put forward alternatives, not even as a minimum calling for the bringing down of the Juppé government. He maintains that members of LO and LCR were too 'content to come across as good student activists or trade unionists rather than as revolutionary socialists' (Harman 1996, 66).

Nevertheless, as later studies show (Cadiou 2004, Joshua 2007), the involvement, influence and effectiveness of Trotskyists inside the trade unions and wider social movements grew significantly in the following decade.

Evaluation

The final section of this chapter evaluates how successful Trotskyists were in their use of *coordinations* as united fronts. Did they, for example, enable the Trotskyists to effectively achieve the two principal aims of any united front: firstly, to build unity between workers in the struggle to win commonly agreed objectives and secondly, to increase their influence amongst workers. I also determine whether the new autonomous unions can also be a means of achieving these same goals.

Whether initiated by them or not, Trotskyists from the LCR and LO always supported the development of *coordinations*. As noted earlier in this chapter, *coordinations*, while different in detail to the united fronts envisioned by the Comintern in 1922 and in Trotsky's later writings, are, nevertheless, adaptations developed to suit particular economic, social and political circumstances. They

share several common characteristics with other forms of united front. One of these is noted by Geay in his research into the 1987 primary school teachers' *coordination* which he describes as:

> [s]e présentant comme une structure ouverte aux non-syndiqués comme aux syndiqués de différentes origines, elle se voulait "représentative" des groupes d'instituteurs engagés dans "la lutte", en dehors, ou au-delà, des stratégies et des luttes inter-syndicales (Geay 1991, 4).

Being open to all workers in a particular sector regardless of their existing union affiliation is a feature common to every *coordination* investigated. Indeed it is perhaps the central feature which in most cases enables them to have a wide appeal and one which is not constrained by predetermined political or union attitudes. Behind this goal of attracting as many workers as possible lies the aspiration of building unity in action, also an essential feature of other united fronts. Unity between workers, according to a study into the 1991 social workers' *coordination* 'a été ressentie comme une nécessité incontournable' (Trat 1994). Furthermore, each *coordination* was built around, at least in the initial phases, a short term goal, 'une revendication unique' (Geay 1991, 4), established and agreed by those involved. In addition, as has been noted earlier, the *coordinations* brought together not only unionised and non-unionised workers but also members of different unions and different political parties. This included Trotskyists working with members of the PCF and PS.

In the majority of *coordinations* described in this chapter, workers were able to win the greater part of their stated objectives. The students forced the

government to shelve their university reforms, the railway workers kept their wages structure, the nurses won wage increases, the postal workers delayed the implementation of the Quilès reforms and the Air France baggage handlers reversed the government plans for wage cuts and redundancies. Only those established by the primary school teachers in 1987 and the aeronautical engineers in 1988 can be considered to have ended in failure. Having played a role in all of these *coordinations*, it can therefore be argued that the Trotskyists successfully achieved the first of their united front aims. In the process however, they hoped to create what they deemed to be a revolutionary consciousness amongst workers and persuade them to break with reformist ideas. Their interventions in mass meetings and participation in *coordinations*, even taking Harman's reservations into account, were designed with these objectives in mind. However, measuring their influence as a result of political agitation is difficult to accurately assess. One reason for this, as explained to the author during an interview with a long-standing LCR activist and local trade union leader[161], was that that there was and continues to exist inside the Trotskyist movement reservations regarding the question about the division between political and economic activity within the trade union movement. The concerns centre on the issues of the *Charte d'Amiens* and the political independence of trade unions,[162] and perhaps more crucially, that of the legacy of the role played over many years by the PCF inside the CGT. Revolutionaries were thus hesitant to be seen to promote overtly political positions which could have alienated workers from them. Indeed, as Harrold, the activist referred to above, stated, 'structures did not exist within the LCR at the

[161] Interview with Ross Harrold, member of LCR [now NPA] and the secondary teachers union SNES on 21 October 2010.
[162] See Béroud and Mouriaux 2006.

time [of the *coordinations*] which could have ensured a coordinated party approach for union activists'.

Nevertheless, it is now generally accepted that from the beginning of the 1990s the Trotskyist parties achieved a higher public profile and recognition than previously, and were successful in obtaining elected positions of responsibility in trade unions.[163] In the period after 1995 in particular, they did achieve a significant measure of success in this respect, both becoming 'major national organisations' and at times winning 'more votes than the Communist Party' (Wolfreys 2006, 15). My contention therefore, is that through the application of the united front tactic in the *coordinations*, the Trotskyists were also successful in achieving their second aim, that of gaining greater support for their political ideas and thus becoming more influential within the workers' movement.

The section in this chapter about the formation of the SUD unions outlined the role played by activists from the far left. My contention is that these unions have, from the outset, offered Trotskyists the possibility of effectively developing the united front tactic. A conventional Marxist interpretation of the role of trade unions under capitalism sees trade unions as being organisations which through mobilising the collective strength of workers in their workplaces attempt to improve and defend wages and conditions. Their role is one of being 'permanent bargaining agents and mediators of conflict' (Darlington 2007, 212). They work within the limits of capitalist relations of production and do not strive to overthrow them. However, the founding documents of the SUD unions, while

[163] For a detailed studies of this trend see: Cadiou 2004, Joshua 2007 and Rizet-Savoi 2006.

stating that they aim to defend members' working conditions, also highlight the need to expropriate capitalists and work towards 'la transformation sociale' (SUD-PTT 1999). They thus see themselves as being more than mere intermediaries who resolve conflicts between workers and their employers. However, they do not stress a need for a revolutionary overthrow of the status quo and so attract revolutionary, reformist and non-aligned workers into their ranks in the same way as united fronts would. The organisational structures of the SUD unions are designed with the principle of participatory democracy at all levels in mind, so that individual members at all times can play an active role in decision making and control the organisation from the bottom up. The relationship to the earlier *coordinations*, with their emphasis on rank-and-file democracy and building the maximum solidarity and unity between workers, is clear from the founding charter of SUD-PTT, which states that the union would:

> soutient et encourage toutes les pratiques de contrôle des mouvements par les travailleur-euse-s (assemblées décisionnelles du personnel, élections de délégué-e-s, comités de grève, coordinations…), ainsi que sa volonté de « limiter au maximum la délégation de pouvoir » et de faire de chaque individu « un acteur à part entière de la lutte en cours (SUD-PTT 1999).

The autonomous unions adapted these methods into more organisationally structured and permanent versions of the former ephemeral *coordinations*. In doing so, opportunities were created for Trotskyists to apply the united front tactic within them.

To conclude therefore, I have demonstrated in this chapter how, during the period examined, the LCR and LO effectively used both *coordinations* and the autonomous unions in order to apply the united front tactic. In doing so, they emphasised the importance of rank-and-file organisational independence and decision making and were, at different times, able to bring together workers from a variety of backgrounds and political persuasions in order to campaign or take action, 'tous ensemble,' in the successful pursuance of a range of specific social, economical and political objectives.

Furthermore, their judicious application of the united front tactic enabled them from the mid-1980s, to achieve a higher national profile than previously for their revolutionary politics and policies and in doing so they made a significant contribution to the resurgence of left-wing radicalism in the final decade of the twentieth century.

Chapter Six

Conclusion

This study has examined the use of the united front tactic by Trotskyist militants inside the French workers' movement during three periods of the last century: the 1930s, the 1940s and the period between 1985 and 1995. During each period, case studies were chosen in order to explore how these activists utilised the tactic in the pursuance of a range of immediate objectives within trade unions or workplaces. This concluding chapter firstly summarises the elements of the earlier chapters before proceeding to consider the questions below. In doing so, I evaluate the success or otherwise of the use of the united front tactic and then make an assessment of its usefulness and relevance to the Trotskyist movement in the contemporary period.

The introductory chapter of this study posed a series of questions to be evaluated through examining the case studies.

- Which common features of the united front tactic are highlighted by the different case studies?
- Did the use of the united front tactic enable Trotskyist militants to effectively intervene in the trade unions?
- Did building united fronts enable these militants to win industrial disputes?
- Were Trotskyists able to build a receptive audience for their wider political and social ideas and in doing so attract workers to their organisations?

- From the point of view of Trotskyists in French trade unions, is the united front tactic one which can be beneficial in the present-day?
- Is the creation of united fronts a realistic, relevant and practical tactic which enables Trotskyist militants to further their industrial and political goals?

According to Trotsky, an ultimate objective of the united front tactic is to create 'a bloc between all the sections of the working class against the whole bourgeoisie' (Trotsky 1922). A consideration and evaluation therefore of the progress made by Trotskyists in working towards this objective forms a component of the evaluation which follows.

The united front: a summary

Chapter Two examined the development of the theory behind the united front from its earliest suggestions in the writings of Marx and Engels to later developments by Lenin, the Bolsheviks, the Communist International and Trotsky. In 1922 the adoption by the Communist International (Comintern) of an appendix[164] to the *Theses on Comintern Tactics* formalised united front theory and affirmed that '[t]he united workers' front must mean the unity of all workers willing to fight against capitalism' (Communist International 1922b). The document, written at a time of increasing world economic crisis, called for the building of unity between revolutionaries and reformist social democratic parties at both leadership and rank-and-file levels, in order to counter the attacks made upon workers' wages, jobs and livelihoods by employers and governments of the

[164] The *Theses On The United Front.*

capitalist countries. It affirmed that in the process of building such coalitions, which they regarded as part of a larger revolutionary strategy, Communists would nevertheless maintain their own organisational independence and freedom of criticism. The intention was to capitalise upon what the Comintern saw as 'a growing respect [by workers] for and confidence in the uncompromising Communist vanguard of the working class' and in doing so draw workers away from the reformist parties and towards the Communists. While stressing the importance of building unity in action between rank-and-file workers and trade unionists the united front tactic as outlined in the *Theses* also involved creating agreements at a national level between the leaderships of different workers' organisations. This assumed the existence of Communist Parties which had a significant degree of influence or support amongst the working class. According to Trotsky and the Comintern, it was only in these circumstances that the use of the united front tactic was considered to be effective. In contrast, where revolutionaries[165] had no influence at a national level it was not deemed to be a priority. 'In cases where the Communist Party still remains an organisation of a numerically insignificant minority, the question of its conduct on the mass-struggle front does not assume a decisive practical and organisational significance' (Trotsky 1922). The historical circumstances of the time, the early 1920s, were such that sizeable reformist and revolutionary parties competing for the leadership of the workers' movement did indeed exist in some countries, such as Czechoslovakia, France and Germany. It was in these circumstances that the use of the united front tactic was considered to be crucial and the revolutionary party 'is confronted with the question of the united front in all its acuteness'

[165] That is to say members of the Communist parties and their supporters.

(Trotsky 1922). From this point of view the united front as developed by the Comintern in 1922 can be considered to be the 'classical' version of the tactic.

The nature and policies of the workers' organisations, especially that of the Communist Parties, changed over time as a result of changing world political, economic and social circumstances. As a consequence, the shape of united fronts and the manner in which the tactic was applied by revolutionaries was modified accordingly. United fronts have therefore, since 1922, taken a variety of different forms, modifications being made in relation to the specific circumstances faced by revolutionaries. 'Obviously, the united front tactic has to be applied differently in different countries, according to the concrete conditions' (Communist International 1922a). This adaptability and flexibility of implementation has been a key characteristic of its use by Trotskyists who, since the second half of the 1920s, have been a minority or marginalised component of the wider workers' movement and in most cases they have not been able to exert a decisive influence over the national leaderships of the trade unions. Instead, they have focussed their efforts on building united fronts amongst grass-roots trade unionists. The emphasis by revolutionaries upon building support amongst ordinary workers in their places of work had always, even in the 'classical' 1922 version, been seen as the most fundamental aspect for developing successful united front agitation. For the most part therefore, this study examined the united front tactic as applied on a micro-level by French Trotskyists when involved in workplace alliances with other rank-and-file workers.

The case studies

Chapter Three, 'The 1936 Hotchkiss strike: the united front tested in practice', examined how, during the strikes and factory occupations following the election of the Popular Front government in the summer of 1936, Trotskyists from the *Parti ouvrier internationaliste* (POI) began to build and develop a united front of all workers in the Hotchkiss automobile and armaments factory in the Paris suburb of Levallois-Perret and, in the process, attempted to incorporate workers from other factories in the surrounding area.

While the POI was not opposed to the eventual reforms, the Matignon Agreements, introduced by the Popular Front government as a result of the strikes during May and June 1936, it argued that these did not go far enough. Indeed, according to Torigian (1999, 112), some 'far-left workers' considered the agreements to be nothing more than a corrupt deal, voicing their unhappiness through the pun '[m]atignon, maquignon'. In agreement with Trotsky, the POI maintained that the industrial unrest could be the beginning of a revolution and its agitation in factories and workplaces was based on this premise. They promoted the idea of building networks of workers' councils locally, regionally and nationally. In doing so, they took the PCF at its word after the publication in *L'Humanité* (24 May 1936) of the headline 'les Soviets partout.'[166]

The workers' strike committee established and led by POI member Georges Chéron in the Hotchkiss factory was an attempt to build a workers' committee

[166] The word soviet is the Russian word for council, but following the events in Russia in 1905 and those after the revolutions in 1917, its meaning came to be associated with councils through which workers' organisations could establish and transmit their authority. However, it is arguable that by the time of the events in France of 1936, for the PCF the word meant 'on the Russian model' or in other words, a copy of the one-party Russian state.

based on the revolutionary meaning of the term, as used by the Bolsheviks in 1917. It would in effect be a united front open to workers and trade unionists of differing political persuasions. It was seen as a forum through which all workers could propose and debate ideas relating to the direction of the strikes and factory occupations. But importantly for the POI, it was to be an active decision-making and organising body which could represent and immediately implement the views of rank-and-file workers. It was successful in that it was able to provide an alternative to the highly bureaucratic, top down machinery of the established trade unions within the CGT. One of the initial decisions of the strike committee was to maintain the factory occupation, despite the signing of the Matignon Agreements between the government, employers and trade unions. The workers at Hotchkiss demanded further improvements, such as the end to the piece-rate system and a guaranteed minimum wage for all, a demand which they later achieved. As the strike committee grew, incorporating workers from other factories, Chéron and the POI put forward more far-reaching demands such as for equal pay for women and the nationalisation without compensation of public services and the largest enterprises. Alongside these, they raised proposals for the extension of autonomous workers' committees and for the establishment of a national congress of factory committees. Such demands eventually brought them into conflict with the regional and national leaderships of both the PCF and the CGT, particularly following Thorez's speech on the 12 June about knowing how to end strikes.

The officials from the *Fédération des métaux* unions in particular were opposed to any attempts by Trotskyists to continue the occupations and strikes, equating

them with provocations originating from the most conservative elements of the employers and even with the fascist parties:

> Dans de nombreuses usines, les violations ouvertes ou détournées des accords n'ont d'autre objectif que de provoquer à des nouveaux débrayages et, si possible, à des occupations d'établissements qui seront ensuite montrées comme de l'agitation révolutionnaire. Il faut déjouer toutes ces manœuvres. Ce n'est pas toujours agréable, ni facile de rester calme devant des provocations évidentes. Il faut cependant savoir conserver son sang-froid … L'occupation des usines n'est pas la seule forme de grève et la grève n'est pas le seul moyen d'obtenir satisfaction (Frachon 1936, 1).

Not wanting to alienate the PRS and so put at risk the Popular Front alliance, the PCF wanted to achieve an end to the strikes and a return to work. Their over-riding priority in doing this was to ensure national economic and social stability and the maintenance of the recently ratified Franco-Soviet pact[167]. The purpose of which was to ensure mutual support against any potential aggression towards France or the Soviet Union coming from Nazi Germany. Moreover, the PCF considered the pact to be an agreement which guaranteed peace. Writing in *L'Humanité* (21 June 1935, 2), prominent PCF central Committee member Jacques Duclos maintained : '[c]'est parce qu'il représente une garantie de paix que le pacte d'assistance mutuelle a été signé par l'URSS.' A revolutionary situation and social upheaval in France which threatened amongst other things the property, power and privileges of the '200 families'[168] could have put this agreement at risk.

[167] Originally signed in May 1935 and then ratified in the Spring of 1936 shortly before the election of the Popular Front government.
[168] See Chapter 3.

From the point of view of the POI, this subservience of the PCF to the wishes of Stalin had led the Communists into making concessions to, and agreements with, the bourgeoisie, and in doing so abandoning any revolutionary agitation and objectives. The PCF had thus become a reformist party like the SFIO, notwithstanding the fact that it at times proposed more radical reforms than the Socialists. The Trotskyists were able to successfully highlight what they saw as the contradiction between the revolutionary rhetoric of the PCF and its reformist practice, through their leadership of the short-lived Hotchkiss strike committee. In doing so, they were therefore able to convey their revolutionary political arguments to a wider and more receptive audience than previously, especially following the decision by the second mass meeting of 587 delegates from 280 different workplaces, to establish an autonomous[169] central action committee. The fact that the PCF and CGT leaderships saw this as a threat is, ironically, a testament to the successful use of the united front tactic by the POI at this time.

In Chapter Four, '1944 -1948: The united front at Caudron and Renault', I evaluated how the united front tactic was interpreted and applied by two different Trotskyist parties in the immediate post-war years. The first example examined the influence over a four year period of the *Parti communiste internationaliste* (PCI) within the workers' committee at the Caudron aeronautical factory. The second case study focused upon the significant role played by Trotskyists, belonging to the *Union communiste* (UC), during a four week period of industrial unrest in the spring of 1947, which culminated with an important strike at the Renault factory in the Paris suburb of Boulogne-Billancourt. The case studies

[169] That is to say, independent from the CGT.

were preceded by an examination of the officially sanctioned rise of various sorts of workers' committees throughout much of French industry, during and following the liberation of the country from Nazi occupation. The PCI in particular, saw these committees as an opportunity, during the final phases of the liberation, to build united fronts of workers which could agitate in the pursuance of a revolutionary civil war. With the establishment of a provisional government at the end of the war, the focus became one of agitating for workers' control of the production and distribution of goods, and then later, one of defending workers from wage cuts and increases in workload, as the Government, with the support of the PCF and the CGT, pursued the policy of increasing industrial output known familiarly as *la bataille pour la production*.

According to an article written in *Le Monde* (12 December 2005), shortly after the death of Simonne Minguet, one of the leading Trotskyists activists involved in the Caudron workers' committee, the decision to occupy the factory in 1944 led to the creation of one of the first examples of *autogestion*, or workers' control, of a workplace. While this complete control by workers proved to be short-lived, the workers' committee they created, comprised of elected delegates from throughout the factory, representing a range of political viewpoints, was to prove to be more long-lasting. Indeed, it remained in existence in various forms until the factory closed in 1948. As a result of her long-standing trade union militancy and her ability to accurately and forcefully represent the wishes of rank-and-file workers, Minguet was elected to a position of leadership on the committee, eventually becoming deputy secretary. In line with the PCI policy of the time, she built up support from other trade unionists, including leading local

members of the PCF, without overtly disclosing her membership of a Trotskyist party. Support for her did not diminish when she later disclosed her membership of the PCI. Notwithstanding this, she was repeatedly elected to the leadership of the committee throughout its four year existence. The Caudron committee can be considered to have been a form of united front in the sense that it brought together workers who, despite coming from differing political persuasions, were prepared to take action in pursuance of a series of economic and union objectives around which they were in agreement. Over the period of its existence these objectives varied, ranging from demands for wage increases or workload reductions, to opposition to job redundancies. At times, these demands were raised in the face of opposition from the PCF and the CGT leaderships. Maintaining her independence as a revolutionary, Minguet used her prominence to criticise PCF policies and also to continue raising demands around the issue of *autogestion*. It is argued though, that while criticising the PCF, her popularity was based more upon her ability to accurately give voice to the economic or union demands raised by shop-floor workers, rather than support for her wider political positions. Alongside other members of the PCI, she established the first workplace branch of the organisation and produced a factory newspaper, *La Vérité Caudron*. Support for the PCI was such that in May 1947 their list of candidates was elected to the CGT branch committee in one of the largest workshops in the factory, and in the process defeated the 'official' CGT list supported by the PCF. In the view of the PCI, this support was a vindication of their adaptability in applying the united front tactic, and their willingness to 's'intégrer à toutes les luttes quel qu'en soit le point de départ' (PCI 1946b).

Another version of the united front was developed during the strike at the Renault factory in April to May 1947. This united front was created in the form of a strike committee which allied different Trotskyist groups, the UC and PCI in particular, alongside non-aligned workers and those who had up until then supported the SFIO or PCF. The Trotskyists had capitalised upon discontent amongst rank-and-file workers in the factory over what they perceived to be the unwillingness of the CGT leadership to call strike action in response to the declining value of wages and falling living standards. The UC put forward a demand for a ten franc per hour wage increase which very quickly gained support amongst workers on the factory floor. The PCF-controlled CGT was not prepared to support the claim, alleging that it went counter to, and put at risk, the *bataille pour la production* policy of the government, of which the PCF was a part. The Renault management, with the support of the CGT, had set up joint production committees which amongst other things, determined pay rates, production targets and working hours. Their position was that any increase in wages should be directly linked to increases in production, a position that became increasingly unacceptable to the workforce. With the support of approximately 100 sympathisers inside the factory, 'action' committees were initiated by the Trotskyists as workers began to down tools and take 'unofficial' strike action over the ten franc demand. Delegates from the different 'action' committees were then elected to the strike committee which, with its principal objective of achieving the ten franc wage increase, eventually had the support of the majority of the 30,000 workers inside the factory. The PCF were concerned that the widespread support from Renault workers for the demands put forward by the UC-led strike committee could possibly lead to them losing majority

control of the CGT unions in the factory. They therefore belatedly gave their backing to the industrial action and in doing so were able to assert their leadership and gain control of the strike movement. It is argued that this change of position led directly to PCF Ministers losing their positions, and over the following months, to the PCF leading ever more militant and overtly political confrontational campaigns against Government policies. The workers eventually went on to achieve a partial victory in that they obtained a wage increase, albeit below the ten franc demand. The UC nevertheless claimed credit for what they saw as a vindication of their tactic of building, from the base upwards, an alliance, or united front, of rank-and-file workers who were prepared to unilaterally decide upon and take action in the pursuit of a commonly agreed specific objective. In the process the UC, through means of shop-floor discussions and debates in the action and strike committees, as well as in the pages of their factory bulletin, *La Voix des travailleurs de chez Renault,* attempted to put forward arguments critical of the PCF. Through such activities, integral as they were to the application of any united front tactic, they expected to be able to attract workers to their ideas. Indeed, there is some evidence to suggest that they were partially successful in this aim (Koch 1999, 20; PCI 1947e, 3). Interpreting this as meaning a willingness by workers to break away from the CGT and its PCF leadership, the UC formed, after the strike, what became in effect a new union, the *Syndicat démocratique Renault* (SDR). This later proved to have been an error of judgment as the vast majority of workers remained in the CGT and supportive of the politics of the PCF. For its part, despite being an integral element of the strike committee, the PCI gained very few permanent new members (PCI 1947b, 7; PCI 1947d, 2). Nevertheless, over

the short term, the use of the united front tactic by the Trotskyists during the Renault dispute proved effective in that significant numbers of workers were convinced by them to take industrial action in a key industrial workplace, in the face of opposition from the established union organisations and the largest workers' party, the PCF. Even though only a partial victory was achieved, the independent action taken by the workforce, and the contribution to this by the UC and PCI, gained national attention. This gave the Trotskyists an opportunity to demonstrate to a wider layer of workers than previously, that an alternative existed to the policies and politics of both the CGT and the PCF. This opening was only short-lived though, as the PCF was reaching its apogee of power and influence within the French workers' movement. In point of fact it proved to be the last time that Trotskyists of any sort were to achieve such a high level of prominence in France until after the events of May 1968.

Chapter Five, '*Coordinations*: a modern form of united front?', examined more recent applications of the tactic in the ten years between 1985 and 1995. The chapter demonstrates how this was a period which saw, on the one hand, a significant continuing decline in numbers in the trade union movement and on the other, a resurgence of radicalism and militancy amongst trade unionists and those involved in wider social movements. This resurgence was frequently allied to a rediscovery of Trotskyism by increasing numbers of workers, many of whom had been influenced, initially by the general strike and student unrest during May 1968, and then by the *autogestion* campaigns which followed in the 1970s. The period was also characterised by increased electoral support for the

Parti socialiste (PS)[170] and a consequent decline in the fortunes of the PCF, which rapidly lost numbers and influence following the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and subsequent breakup of the USSR and Eastern Bloc regimes. The far-left parties saw an increase in those voting for them, not only in parliamentary and local council elections but also in contests for representative positions within the trade unions. The Trotskyist parties of the time, the LCR, OCI and LO in particular, achieved arguably a greater and more unprecedented influence within the workers' movement than at any previous time in their existence.

As in earlier periods, the united front tactic was used during this time as a means through which the various Trotskyist parties could engage with other workers and build alliances in order to defend or improve wages, conditions and standards of living. The specific circumstances of the period however, meant that the united front frequently took on a different form to that seen before, in the shape of what are known as *coordinations*. Chapter Five focused on the development and practice of this particular form of workers' self-organisation, maintaining that despite having antecedents in the earliest examples of workers' struggles and associations, they nevertheless represented an adaptation of the united front tactic which corresponded to the particular circumstances of the time. The chapter highlighted several examples of *coordinations* established during industrial disputes involving railway workers, primary school teachers, nurses and postal workers and made reference to contemporary media sources, archive and research material. I demonstrated how Trotskyists were able, in several instances, to play a leading role in the *coordinations* established by

[170] Founded in 1971 at the Congrès d'Epinay. This united the former SFIO and other social democratic groups into one political party.

workers involved in both industrial disputes and wider social movements. The spontaneous development and independent character of the earliest *coordinations,* combined with the involvement of the Trotskyists and their focus upon involving the democratic participation of the widest possible layers of workers, caused concern amongst the less radical trade union leaderships. This led to the expulsion from some unions of activists, who in the eyes of the leaderships represented an untenable threat to the cohesion and stability of the existing union organisations. In two cases, involving postal and health workers, these expelled militants went on to establish their own unions under the *SUD-Solidaires* umbrella. These independent unions, it is argued, represented further opportunities for the development of the united front tactic.

By the time of the industrial unrest and strikes of November and December 1995 the work of both the PCF and PS inside the union movement had become less hegemonic. To some extent, this change of attitude enabled activists from the far left, including Trotskyists, to have greater opportunities and play a much more overt and influential role within the unions than previously. Their earlier promotion of united fronts through the means of *assemblées générales* and *coordinations* initiated by shop-floor workers began, from this point onwards, to be accepted by the union leaderships and incorporated into official union strategies. Despite this, the number of SUD unions established, often by activists from the far left, continued to grow, although in most workplaces they represented only a minority of the workforce. The most well-known exception to this was in the postal service where SUD-PTT overtook the CFDT to become, after the CGT, the second largest union in the industry. The chapter examined

and assessed these developments. An evaluation of the part played by Trotskyist parties in these united fronts, in the final sections of the chapter, demonstrates that they in turn benefited numerically and electorally from their involvement in what has been regarded by many, as a resurgence of radicalism in French society. The Trotskyist parties thus began to assert their influence with some success, and in doing so were no longer considered to be such a marginalised force within the workers' movement as they had been in the past.

Common features

Having recapitulated on the preceding chapters, I will now proceed to consider the questions posed at the beginning of this chapter. The first of these asked if it were possible to discern any common features in the use of the united front tactic from the different case studies. Apart from the active involvement of revolutionary Trotskyists in all the case studies, an examination of them does indeed reveal the existence of other shared characteristics, such as a focus upon the active involvement of rank-and-file workers, the incorporation of activists irrespective of their initial union or political affiliation, the use of decision making mass-meetings and directly elected action or strike committees, the localised nature of the united fronts (albeit at times being part of a more wide-scale movement), agreed specific aims and in most cases the disbanding of the united front once these aims had been achieved. In each case study, the interventions made by Trotskyist activists were intended to mobilise the maximum number of workers and encourage them to critically question the approach of the established trade union and political organisations. In the process of such deliberations they attempted to persuade workers to abandon support for

what the Trotskyists deemed to be reformist ideas, and instead, encouraged them to support their own revolutionary standpoints. The manner in which the revolutionaries attempted to develop the united fronts was, in the first instance, usually through proposing specific objectives designed to gain the maximum support from shop-floor workers. Typically these were of a short-term nature and by and large ones that related to wages or working conditions, the ten franc wage demand which had led to the strike at Renault in 1947 being a prime example. It is also noteworthy that in each of the united fronts, whether in the form of a strike committee, factory committee, *coordination* or autonomous union, the Trotskyists formed only a minority of those involved. Indeed, in most cases the united fronts were not created on the initiative of the Trotskyists themselves. They did, however, attempt to be the most ardent participants and it was the nature of this involvement in the united fronts which became one of the crucial factors determining the character of each one:

> It is precisely in the course of struggle that the broad masses must learn from experience that we fight better than the others, that we see more clearly than the others, that we are more audacious and resolute (Trotsky 1922).

In the case of the Hotchkiss dispute for example, the strike committee had originally been formed around demands common to workers in other factories and other industries[171], while some were specific to the metalworkers in the Hotchkiss factory[172]. But it was the particular approach taken by Chéron and the POI in the pursuit of these demands which distinguished the dispute from the many others at the time. In this case, the Trotskyists, through their political

[171] For example, the demand for a maximum 40 hour week.
[172] For example, the abolition of piece-rate working.

interventions, successfully began to transform the strike committee from one that conformed to the directives of the PCF-influenced CGT officials, to one that achieved, for a short time, a significant measure of autonomy, thus enabling it to pursue a more radical agenda determined directly by the workers themselves.

Karl Marx stated that 'the emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves' (Marx 1864). This concept of workers' emancipation through their active participation has remained an, if not the most, essential component of revolutionary strategy and tactics for Trotskyists and underlies much of their involvement and activity in united fronts. In addition, they have emphasised this activity in the form of independent decision making and action initiated by rank-and-file workers without necessarily waiting for the consent of trade union bureaucrats. As a striking transport worker in 1995 remarked: '[c]'est notre grève, le patron le subit, une grève se gère par les grévistes eux-mêmes' (Kail 1996, 459). In doing so, not only do Trotskyists assert that workers are able to win improvements to their pay, conditions and standards of living by taking such actions, but also that they can be considered to be taking revolutionary first steps. Both of these elements were evident in POI publications during the strikes and factory occupations in 1936 which gave rise to the Hotchkiss Strike Committee. An internal bulletin of the time notes:

> cette lutte directe … est et sera une éducatrice révolutionnaire de premier ordre … parce que l'action directe bouscule les bases de la démocratie bourgeoise, détruit les icônes de la propriété privée (POI 1936j, 3).

The front page of the first copy of the POI newspaper called upon workers to take control of their factories and advised them thus:

> [a]pprenez à gérer l'usine en travail comme vous la gériez au repos. Le pouvoir ouvrier dans l'usine, c'est la première étape vers le pouvoir total (*La Lutte Ouvrière* 12 June 1936).

A POI booklet produced later in the same year claimed that, '[l]es conquêtes de juin ont été arrachées par la classe ouvrière grâce à l'action directe' (POI 1936i, 8).

These elements are discernible in all the case studies. In the springtime of 1947 for example, immediately prior to the strike at the Renault automobile factory, a PCI internal bulletin discussed in detail the united front tactic and its importance as a 'facteur de mobilisation' which enabled the revolutionary party to bring into action 'des couches plus larges que celles qu'il aurait pu mobiliser par ses propres forces' (PCI 1947h, 13). The document highlighted that it was through direct involvement and participation in workplace industrial action that the working class was able to 'fortifier sa conscience de classe' (PCI 1947y, 12) and thus begin to question the leaderships of the established political parties. Another internal document later that same year stated that:

> [l]e Parti fera un effort constant pour se lier dans l'action aux travailleurs en lutte en réalisant à la base une unité d'action qui sera le meilleur moyen de montrer qu'il est le seul défenseur du prolétariat (PCI 1947e, 15).

The mass mobilisations of workers, often initiated independently of the trade unions, which gave rise to the *co-ordinations* from 1985 onwards, again led to discussion about the importance of grass-roots organisation and activity. The LCR held that integral to the preparation of mass struggles was the need to 'stimuler la prise en main par les travailleurs de leurs affaires' (LCR 1988, 42) and gave 'la plus grande importance à l'auto-organisation des luttes' (LCR 1988, 43). A study into the *coordinations* remarked that participatory grass-roots democracy in the form of *assemblées générales* was a key component in their success (Hassenteufel 1991, 6).

This aspect of the *coordination* movement is once again highlighted in a later study, which maintains that they brought to the fore the question of 'la démocratie directe, à la base dans les luttes' (Kouvélakis 2007, 193).

Such is the significance of independent action organised from the base up, that it continues to be emphasised by contemporary Trotskyists activists. The role of revolutionaries is, according to them, to encourage, facilitate and support workers who are prepared to organise themselves in the pursuit of immediate and specific economical, social or political objectives. Trotskyists maintain that by doing so, rank-and-file workers will develop the experience and confidence necessary in order to pursue more far-reaching objectives:

> Pour tous les opprimés, s'organiser est indispensable pour pouvoir agir. S'organiser bien sûr sur le lieu de travail ou son quartier, dans un syndicat ou une association … [t]oute l'activité des militants de la LCR, vise à faire vivre la démocratie, c'est-à-dire à l'organisation des exploités et des opprimés pour défendre leurs droits … agir pour

> construire l'unité nécessaire aux mobilisations, c'est aussi le combat pour l'émancipation des travailleurs par eux-mêmes' (LCR 2007, 29).

In the united fronts examined in this study, Trotskyist activists invariably formed only a minority of those involved. They nevertheless attempted on each occasion to work in alliance with others, who may or who may not have been affiliated to the other workers' parties or organisations and who certainly, for the most part, did not hold an identical revolutionary socialist political position to the Trotskyists. Building such alliances, as observed in point twenty three of the *Theses On The United Front* (Communist International 1922b) and noted throughout this study, is a fundamental principle of united front theory: '[t]he united workers' front must mean the unity of all workers willing to fight against capitalism – including those workers who still follow the anarchists, syndicalists etc.' In Chapter Three I briefly noted an attempt at building a united front of those within the CGTU who were opposed to the Moscow-dominated policies of the PCF. Called the *Opposition unitaire* (OU), this attempt I consider not to have been a genuine united front in that it limited itself to those workers who considered themselves already to be revolutionaries. This misinterpretation of what was meant by a united front does not appear to have occurred in the case studies that I have examined. In each example, as has been demonstrated in the preceding chapters, Trotskyists made efforts to involve workers from a wide variety of political persuasions. The united fronts cited were built initially around limited unifying demands, such as that for the ten franc pay rise at Renault in 1947, concerning the defence or improvement of jobs and working conditions, or aspects of welfare and social benefits. Once active alliances had been made, the Trotskyists were then able to make propositions and raise

demands which began to question the ability or willingness of established union leaders and their political allies to pursue with the necessary vigour campaigns which would lead to the winning of the demands. In doing so they would highlight what they saw as the shortcomings in the established leaders and go on to propose more radical and far-reaching methods or objectives which would invariably include the need for the revolutionary overthrow of the existing social order.

A first step towards this objective, in the view of the Trotskyists, was to call for the establishment of rank-and-file-controlled workers' committees. 'Le point central, c'est la création de conseils ou comités' (POI 1936j, 5) and this is another common feature in all the case studies. Such committees, usually established following decisions taken during mass meetings of workers, are seen to be examples of united fronts in practice and have initially tended to take the form of action or strike committees in individual workplaces. The Trotskyists asserted that the creation of local, regional and national networks of these workers' committees could be the precursors to an alternative and more democratic form of state organisation and political power, one in which they maintained that workers' interests would be better represented. Seeing them as a step towards the development of Bolshevik-style soviets, calls for the creation of such networks frequently appear in Trotskyist internal and external publications, particularly in times of industrial unrest. 'Le comité est l'arme contre la bourgeoisie, mais il faudra libérer l'arme du fourreau stalinien' (POI 1936j, 6). The front page headlines of the first copy of *La Lutte Ouvrière* (12 June 1936) urged workers to build a 'puissant congrès des comités.' This was followed up

and reinforced by a POI leaflet of the time, described in Chapter Three, which called for '[l]a République française des Soviets'. An article in October stated that 'c'est le comité d'entreprise qui réalise le mieux l'union de tous les exploités contre les exploiteurs capitalistes' (*La Lutte Ouvrière,* 31 October 1936). Similarly, the strategy used by Minguet in the Caudron factory from 1944, was to strengthen and highlight the importance and power of the various workers' committees, especially that of the *commission exécutive centrale* (CEC). Bois and other members of the UC made the creation of autonomous rank-and-file action and strike committees the focus of their interventions during the Renault strike. Their success was due to the importance they gave to these committees and their use as bodies which could immediately debate, convey and carry through the wishes of the workforce. This is borne out in the following extract from a leaflet distributed by UC members during the annual 1 May demonstration in Paris in 1947:

> Le Comité de grève, pour mener cette lutte qui intéresse tous les travailleurs, a fait immédiatement appel à toutes les usines Renault. Et malgré l'opposition de la Direction syndicale officielle, les travailleurs, organisés ou non, et quelle que soit leur appartenance aux différentes organisations syndicales ou politiques, ont été UNANIMES pour adopter nos revendications (Barta 1947).

Throughout the duration of the strike, the elected strike committee called not only for mobilisations around the ten franc wage claim but also for the setting up of inter-factory strike committees all over the Paris region (Peters 1947, 186).

The PCI, for their part, had a comparable policy of agitating 'constamment dans les usines pour y constituer dans la lutte des Comités de Grève

démocratiquement élus, desquels sortiront les cadres syndicaux révolutionnaires ayant l'appuis des travailleurs' (PCI 1947e, 15). The creation of elected strike committees would secure 'la voie de la victoire' (*Front Ouvrier,* 1 May 1947).They held that in order to achieve effective unity in action by workers 'la formation de Comités de grève est tout à fait décisive' (PCI 1947h, 1). Remarking upon their interventions during other strikes in 1947, a PCI internal bulletin from the following year describes how they had consistently attempted to develop 'un rassemblement démocratique des comités de grève, auxquels on pouvait assigner des tâches révolutionnaires' (PCI 1948, 9).

The industrial struggles of the 1970s which had focused upon the issue of *autogestion,* brought sharply to the fore once again the notion of rank-and-file workers taking control of their own destinies through the means of mass meetings and elected strike and factory committees. The *Ligue communiste* (LC)*,* forerunner of the LCR, following the practice of earlier Trotskyist groups, argued that the struggle for 'l'autogestion socialiste' needed 'l'organisation démocratique des grèves' through the means of elected and revocable strike committees which in turn, could lay the ground for the creation of more extensive factory committees and workers' councils (LC 1972, 99). An LC journal from 1973, devoted entirely to the structure of, and relationship between, *assemblées générales* and *comités de grèves*, argued that the AG should be open to all workers whether union members or not and should be the principal debating and decision making body during any strike or industrial action. It compared this position to that of PCF-controlled unions, which in the view of LC used mass meetings only to impose or rubber stamp decisions, having already

being taken elsewhere, behind closed doors. The *comités de grèves* would, in the view of the Trotskyists, complement the AG by being elected executive bodies whose function was to ensure that decisions taken at an AG were carried through:

> Le comité de grève est l'instrument privilégié qui permet le contrôle de la direction de la grève par les travailleurs concernés. … L'élection du comité de grève permet de conférer la direction quotidienne de la lutte aux travailleurs les plus combatifs, aux porte-paroles les plus résolus des grévistes. … Décisions importantes en A.G. des grévistes, gestion quotidienne de la lutte par le comité de grève (LC 1973, 12).

The expansion of *coordinations* by the time of the industrial unrest of the 1980s was seen by the LCR as an enhancement of such earlier workers' committees. Denis (1994, 4) asserts that the many 'divers comités' created by workers during industrial disputes[173] play 'un rôle important … dans la constitution de la coordination'. Chevandier (2007, 4) noted in a later study that the 'coordinations sont bien la suite des comités de grève' and how, during the nurses disputes in 1988 and 1991, each *assemblée générale* elected representatives and delegates to the regional or national *coordinations*. Combined with the use of *assemblées générales*, *coordinations* represented for the LCR, 'une forme d'organisation supérieure, quand la mobilisation atteint une phase supérieure' (LCR 1988, 41). Seeing them as being part and parcel of the 'structures d'auto-organisation' which always appear when workers' struggles reach a certain level, *coordinations*, the party maintained, 'deviennent une forme transitoire d'organisation, quand les travailleurs frappent à la porte du pouvoir' (LCR 1988, 43). None of the Trotskyist groups ever seriously proposed the question of a

[173] In particular those at the aeronautical engineering group SNECMA and Air France in 1988.

revolutionary seizure of power during this period. However, with the perceived decline and shortcomings of the established trade unions, the rise of the *coordinations* did begin to raise questions about the representation of organised workers. A report in *Le Monde* (4 January 1987) into the railway workers strikes during the winter of 1986 to 1987, described how the *Coordination nationale des agents de conduite* (CNAC), influenced by the LCR, had been established specifically to provide a national organising body, separate from the trade unions, which could synchronise the actions of the thirty-two 'comités de grève des agents de conduite' which had sprung up throughout the country. The other major Trotskyist organisation, LO, had been influential for its part in another railway workers' *coordination*, the *Coordination nationale intercatégories des cheminots* (CNIC). In an analysis of the strike movement shortly afterwards, the organisation, regretting that the two *coordinations* had ultimately only represented a minority of the strikers, asserted that they had nevertheless, been a pointer towards an alternative more democratic and unifying form of workers' organisation:

> L'organisation démocratique et indépendante de la grève à l'échelle nationale, n'a donc été qu'embryonnaire. Et pourtant, telle quelle, c'était tout de même le début de quelque chose de nouveau (*Lutte Ouvrière* 1987).

Much of the impetus for the creation of *coordinations* during this period was due to the inability or unwillingness of the established trade unions to support demands raised by rank-and-file workers who therefore felt that they had no other option than to create new representative structures. In an interview in *Le Monde* (19 April 1988), Arlette Laguiller, spokesperson for LO, highlighted the

link between strike committees, *coordinations* and the role played in these by Trotskyists:

> A la SNECMA actuellement, les comités de grève et les coordinations regroupent toutes les tendances du mouvement ouvrier, trotskistes ou pas. L'essentiel, ce ne sont pas les élections mais les luttes où les travailleurs se retrouvent au coude à coude.

During much of the period between 1986 and 1989 the trade union leaderships, as well as those of the PCF and PS, viewed the *coordinations* with suspicion and concern, deeming them at times a threat and considering them in most cases to be unnecessary distractions. On the other hand, the two main Trotskyist parties, LCR and LO, attached a high level of importance to them; their significant involvement in the strike committees and *coordinations* being seen as an opportunity for them to be able to increase their influence and support amongst workers:

> Il faut dire que les "coordinations" et autres "comités de grève" suscitent toujours la suspicion de la CGT, alors qu'ils sont très prisés par l'extrême gauche (Biffaud 1987).

As noted in Chapter Five, this trepidation, by the CFDT in particular, of being overwhelmed by activists from the far left, eventually led to the formation of SUD-PTT and SUD-Santé. These unions, along with others in the *Solidaires* group, from their beginnings made great use of direct democracy and accountability through *assemblées générales* and various types of rank-and-file workers' committees. Affirming that each workplace is 'un lieu de lutte de classes' (Coupé 2007, 62), the SUD unions, referring to the *Charte d'Amiens*, see their objective as being the 'défense immédiate des salariés, transformation

sociale et contre-pouvoir' (Coupé 2007, 63). In order to achieve these objectives they have developed structures designed to promote as much democratic participation and activism as possible amongst their members:

> C'est au syndicalisme de proposer les moyens adaptés pour favoriser cette démocratie: information, réunions, consultation, assemblées générales, comités de luttes syndiqués-non-syndiqués. Il s'agit de faire en sorte que les salariés aient leur mot à dire, que l'expression démocratiques soit favorisée par le syndicalisme (Coupé 2007, 131).

An effective tactic?

Having highlighted the major common features between the case studies, I now turn to the questions of whether the use of the united front tactic enabled Trotskyists to intervene effectively inside the trade unions, to contribute to the winning of industrial disputes and to build a receptive audience for their ideas. In considering these issues it is important to note that in every case study the Trotskyists represented only a small minority of those participating in the different united fronts and this undoubtedly had a bearing upon the effectiveness of their interventions. The comparative size, power and authority of the rival workers' organisations who opposed them, such as the PCF, a party which the Trotskyists considered to be reformist, cannot be ignored. A view shared by all the Trotskyists however, is that, as Lukács put it, such other 'parties and the unions they control … strive to prevent them [the proletariat] from turning their attention to the totality, whether this be territorial, professional etc., or whether it involves synthesising the economic movement with the political one' (Lukács 1990, 310). That is to say, these organisations actively aim to put a break on any revolutionary aspirations of the most militant workers. Similarly, if Trotskyist

agitation within united fronts was to be able to foster a revolutionary class consciousness amongst workers, it also needed to be able to counter the experience and effects of the socialisation processes at work under capitalism. These processes were graphically described by Marx as being '[t]he tradition of all dead generations' which 'weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living' [Marx 1852, 146). Furthermore, as Gramsci remarked, workers involved in struggles to improve their livelihoods and working conditions at any particular point in time, are likely to have a 'contradictory consciousness' (Gramsci 1977, 333). On the one hand, being committed to a socialist or communist ideal and yet on the other, not being prepared to accept the need for a revolutionary transformation of society. Instead, for most of the time they continue to conform to the 'day-to-day ideology of the bourgeoisie' (Gramsci 1977, 395), the dominant ideas in society related to such concepts as the need for reasonableness and gradual change through accepted parliamentary methods. Given their meagre resources, the task therefore that the Trotskyists had set themselves was considerable, to say the least.

The successful outcome to an industrial or social dispute from the point of view of most workers and from that of Trotskyists in particular, is determined by both objective and subjective factors, and not least by the relative strengths of the different competing social, economic and political interests – described by Marxists as 'the balance of class forces'. This equilibrium is consistently changing and is rarely the same at any two points in time, making exact comparisons difficult between events in different periods. Nevertheless, what follows is an attempt to do so.

Trotskyist interventions in industrial disputes, of whatever type, are usually intended to achieve two main objectives. These are, as has been noted elsewhere, firstly to bring about unity in action of the largest possible numbers of workers in order to win specific demands and secondly while doing so, to convince as many workers as possible to lend their support or allegiance to the Trotskyist parties. Highlighted throughout this study, these objectives form the basis for Trotskyist interventions and the application of the united front tactic. In doing so they:

> must unite the spontaneous discoveries of the masses, which originate in their correct class instincts, with the totality of the revolutionary struggle, and bring them to consciousness (Lukács 1977, 36).

The role of the revolutionary party, as the term implies, has a vital role to play in this development of revolutionary consciousness amongst workers, a process which Trotskyists maintain cannot be left to chance or pure spontaneity. Agreeing with Lenin, who maintained that 'the working class, exclusively by its own effort, is able to develop only trade union consciousness' (Lenin 1901), Trotsky suggests several criteria in order to be able to make an assessment into the effectiveness of such interventions made by the revolutionary party:

> The number of Communists[174] in leading posts of the trade unions is only one of the means of measuring the role of the party in the trade unions. The most important measurement is the percentage of rank-and-file Communists in relation to the whole unionised mass. But the principal criterion is the general influence of the party on the working class, which is measured by the circulation of the Communist press, the

[174] By this term he means revolutionaries in the sense of the Bolsheviks in 1917.

> attendance at meetings of the party, the number of votes at elections and, what is especially important the number of working men and women who respond actively to the party's appeals to struggle (Trotsky 1929).

While it is possible in most cases to assess whether the limited or specific demands of a particular industrial dispute or conflict have been attained, calculating how effective or successful the Trotskyists were at achieving the other aspects of the objectives is not quite as straightforward. Precise statistical evidence, for example, on affiliation to a party as a direct result of a particular form of Trotskyist intervention either does not exist or is unreliable. Such a lacuna could of course become the basis for future in-depth research.

The major short-term economic and trade union demands around which the united fronts analysed in this study were formed, were in most cases obtained. The Hotchkiss strike committee was successful in ensuring that the Matignon Agreements, as well as other workplace specific demands, were implemented. The Caudron workers' committee was able to ameliorate wages, working conditions and limit redundancies. The strike committee at the Renault factory, although not one hundred per cent successful, was nevertheless crucial to the winning of pay rises across the factory. Of the seven *coordinations* examined from the 1980s, five can be considered to have been comparatively successful in achieving their aims. During the social and industrial unrest of 1995, the systematic use of united fronts in a variety of forms ensured that the government proposals on pensions and the restructuring of the SNCF were abandoned, at least in the short-term.

Using Trotsky's criterion of the 'general influence of the party on the working class', the results are more variable, and as was noted in the earlier chapters, need to be considered over both the short and long terms. As I demonstrated when evaluating the case studies, when measured in quantative terms, such as that of newspaper circulation, membership numbers or voting figures, initially the Trotskyists were able each time to gain influence and increase support for their political positions. But these immediate gains were for the most part not sustained over the longer term. When considering, for example, the successful interventions of the POI in the Hotchkiss strike committee, it is noticeable that as soon as the PCF was able to reassert its position in the factory, the support that the POI had gained dissipated within a few weeks. The Trotskyists, and especially their most experienced and well known activist Georges Chéron, found themselves once again marginalised and unable to maintain an overt presence inside the factory. Workers, who had earlier started to develop what could be considered to be a more radical consciousness, as they attempted to create a rank-and-file-controlled alternative to that of the official CGT unions, were persuaded to abandon such ideas and maintain their allegiance with the existing organisations. Chéron and the Hotchkiss strike committee had had some success in encouraging workers from other local factories to join with them in the creation of a network of factory committees independently of, but also incorporating, the existing unions. This was developed along the lines advocated in the pages of the POI newspaper *La Lutte Ouvrière.* These developments were then abandoned when workers were faced with opposition to them from the long-established and influential *Fédération des métaux* section of the CGT. The instability of the support for the POI position arguably confirmed to some extent

Trotsky's assertion that '[r]evolution is full of contradictions. It unfolds only by taking one step back after taking two steps forward' (Trotsky 1931c). By the time of the autumn 1936, any gains that the Trotskyists had made in Levallois, and indeed anywhere elsewhere, were negated when groups within the POI became involved in internecine differences of opinion, resulting in a haemorrhaging of membership and the fragmentation of the organisation.

A similar picture can be seen after the 1947 Renault strike. The Trotskyists in the UC were at the forefront of the united front leading the strike movement and their propositions in this regard gained mass support throughout the factory. This backing led them to believe that workers were prepared to split from their original political and union organisations, the PCF and CGT, and become active participants in an alternative organisation, the SDR. When by 1950 this had not come to fruition, the UC presence in the factory all but disappeared. The PCI, the other Trotskyists involved in the strike, even though they claimed to have strengthened to some extent their organisation in the immediate aftermath of the strike, ultimately by the end of the decade, suffered a comparable fate to that of the UC.

On the other hand it could be argued that in the Caudron factory between 1944 and 1947, Minguet and the PCI were more successful in the use of the united front tactic, in that they were able to sustain a level of influence amongst their fellow workers for a more prolonged period of time. This influence was only brought to an end by the forced closure of the factory. However, as was noted in Chapter Four, Minguet did not initially declare her Trotskyist affiliation. She

only did so after having established herself as a successful union activist and organiser.

The 'general influence' of Trotskyists upon the French working class during and after the *coordination* movements of the mid-1980s was arguably more pronounced than at any time previously. It is self-evident of course, that the political and social circumstances, the 'balance of class forces', had changed significantly from that of the 1930s and immediate post-war period. Following the events of 1968, the consequent rebirth of the far left and that of the Trotskyist parties in particular, revolutionary socialists were able to play a far more overt role in both the trade union and wider social movements. As has been illustrated in Chapter Five, Trotskyists were able to play leading roles and influence the direction of many *coordinations* and were behind the creation of the SUD union formations. Their influence was apparent inside trade unions, as activists were gradually elected to local, regional and national positions of responsibility, particularly following the '[l]'étoilement progressif du PCF' (Rizet-Savoi 2006, 192).

Trotskyists were also elected to representative positions in municipal and regional councils (LO 2001).[175] By the end of the 1990s, their electoral successes were such that between them the LCR and LO managed to win five seats to the European parliament. In some constituencies during the first round voting for parliamentary and presidential elections, the combined vote for far-left parties

[175] Refer also to websites : *France Politique, le site d'information sur la vie politique française*. http://www.france-politique.fr/ <Politique> [accessed 22 May 2011] and *Le Monde*, *Base élections* http://abonnes.lemonde.fr/web/elections/0,37-0,47-0,0.html <Le Monde.fr : Base élections>.

occasionally reached as much as ten per cent or more. However, contesting municipal and legislative elections is not considered to be a priority for the Trotskyist parties. The process of contesting elections is seen more as a method of obtaining publicity and additional platforms to present their revolutionary ideas to a wider audience than usual. Their priority strategy, highlighted throughout this study, is one of convincing workers to actively break with reformist ideas and to build instead, a revolutionary consciousness.

As I have demonstrated from the case studies, a key component of this revolutionary strategy has been the use of the united front tactic to develop a willingness amongst workers to take collective action in defence of previously-acquired social, economic and political rights and while doing so, 'féconder le front unique d'un contenu révolutionnaire' (*La Verité* September 1934, 6). This has involved participation in united fronts in a wide range of social movements, but the major emphasis has been one of activism in workplaces and within the trade union movement. Indeed, 'l'engagement syndical apparaît comme le point d'ancrage du militantisme politique' (Joshua 2007, 46).

Continued relevance of the united front tactic

In the light of all these various experiences of united fronts, I now turn to the question of whether the tactic continues to have relevance in the present day. Do Trotskyists consider it to be effective, realistic, of practical use and one which, in their view, is beneficial to them in furthering their industrial and political aims?

Since 1995, united fronts have been formed by numerous single-issue campaigns and social movements,[176] such as those opposing the FN or in support of the *sans papiers*. The LCR, precursor to the NPA, played a more significant role in these than LO, which tended to limit its involvement to those campaigns directly related to industrial, workplace or trade union issues. In addition, for the most part, it confined its united front interventions to those sectors in which it already had activist members in place. This has been a long-recognised approach of the organisation. In documentation regarding workplace and trade union interventions, LO rarely makes direct reference to the term united front. When it is used, it is invariably in the context of electoral alliances with other parties. However, their public documentation does stress the need to 'agir collectivement' and to unite 'tous ensemble' (Lutte ouvrière 2009, 9). Reports of strikes and industrial conflicts in their weekly newspaper, *Lutte Ouvrière*, regularly highlight the need for unified action by workers. Moreover, they make clear that a priority for its members is to build as wide a unity as possible at all times in, 'la défense des intérêts de leurs camarades de travail' and that, '[i]ls sont de toutes les grèves, de toutes les luttes, pour permettre au jour le jour aux travailleurs de se défendre par la lutte de classes'. Furthermore, the same document states that '[p]our constituer une force, les travailleurs doivent s'unir' (Lutte ouvrière 2011). Unity in action at workplace and trade union level, it continues, is considered to be a means whereby workers will begin to see the necessity of a more radical solution than that proposed by existing leaders of workers' political and trade union organisations. What is required is a 'parti politique capable d'organiser leur combat - un parti qui ne peut être que

[176] See Aguiton and Bensaid (1997) and Béroud, Mouriaux, and Vakaloulis (1998).

communiste et révolutionnaire' (Lutte ouvrière 2011). In effect therefore, LO make the case for united fronts to be built amongst workers in each workplace and sector of industry which can defend workers' interests, and at the same time, become a forum for the promotion of revolutionary alternatives. It is clear, from a paper presented to the *Cercle Léon Trotsky*[177] in October 2010, that for LO, the construction of a mass revolutionary party necessitates building the greatest possible unity amongst workers:

> Mais construire un parti communiste révolutionnaire, c'est-à-dire une direction politique pour permettre aux travailleurs de renverser le pouvoir de la bourgeoisie, présuppose d'être liés aux travailleurs dans tous leurs combats, les petits comme les plus grands (Lutte ouvrière 2010).

While attempting to build this mass party, LO stresses the need for its members to be active in all the union confederations, but prefers, where possible, those unions which are part of the CGT. Within this confederation, it sees its role as being one which can:

> offrir une politique aux plus conscients des travailleurs pour … démasquer les faux amis, affronter les vrais ennemis, transformer les organes démocratiques de lutte en organes de pouvoir du prolétariat, en embryons de l'État ouvrier (Lutte ouvrière 2010).

In its own practice at a workplace level therefore, it can be argued that LO does continue to see the usefulness and necessity of using the united front tactic. The criteria for a united front, as outlined in Chapter Two – that of promoting workers' unity in action, maintaining an organisational independence from other

[177] Public meeting, attended by the author, organised by LO at the *Maison de la Mutualité*, Paris, 15 October 2010.

organizations and aiming to win political influence – are all evident in their interventions and campaigning.

In contrast, the LCR frequently made reference to the idea of the united front tactic, although did not always explicitly use the term in documents destined for non-members or the general public. For example, leaflets distributed outside workplaces by activists would, as a matter of course, make appeals for unity and united action, such as one from 16 November 2007 which had the headline: 'Tous ensemble c'est le moment' (LCR 2007). The leaflet then described how in order to win a particular industrial dispute, 'c'est un mouvement d'ensemble interprofessionnel qu'il faut construire'. The LCR manifesto, issued during the campaigns for the 2007 presidential and parliamentary elections, stated that revolutionaries, 'luttent toujours pour constituer un front unitaire des partis et organisations qui réclament des intérêts populaires contre ceux du patronat et de la bourgeoisie' (LCR 2007a, 27). More overt and detailed references to the united front tactic were, however, evident in internal documents. The following extract demonstrates how the tactic and principles of the united front were still considered to be necessary. Particular mention is made of maintaining political independence while building unity in action. That is to say, 'marching separately but striking together':

> Si chaque organisation marche séparément en fonction de ce qu'elle propose (comme perspective globale, comme mot d'ordre immédiat et comme formes de lutte), il faut frapper ensemble chaque fois que possible. La LCR n'a pas d'intérêts propres qui s'opposeraient à des accords pour la lutte. Sur un terrain d'ensemble ou sur des thèmes plus restreints, elle cherche toujours à constituer un front unitaire des partis et

> organisations qui se réclament des intérêts populaires contre ceux du patronat et de la bourgeoisie. Elle s'adresse à ces organisations telles qu'elles sont, pour favoriser la mobilisation sur ce qui est commun. Ces accords pratiques doivent renforcer le caractère démocratique de la lutte et respecter la liberté de parole et d'initiative de chaque organisation. (LCR 2006, 96)

The subject was a recurrent topic of debate amongst members of the LCR and their supporters, especially leading up to the formation of the NPA in 2009, (Jaffard 2008; Sabado 2008; Verdon 2007, 54). As part of this debate Godard (2008) suggests that the united front tactic should continue to be considered as a compass or guide to action for revolutionaries. He sees it as a practical way of combining what he deems to be important components of revolutionary strategy: the relationship between the revolutionary party, the organised workers' movement, and the struggle for political and cultural hegemony in society. Acknowledging that the tactic was formalised in light of the specific circumstances following the 1917 Russian revolution, he nevertheless maintains that it should remain a key component in any strategic considerations by contemporary revolutionaries. 'La référence au front unique va se poursuivre comme référence stratégique-clef de la tradition révolutionnaire alors même que certains facteurs évoluent du fait notamment du développement du stalinisme' (Godard 2008). In doing so, he refers back to Lenin, who wrote that '[i]t is the *duty* of Communists to seek *and find* a suitable form of compromise' with reformist workers and the more left-wing components of their political parties. By finding a 'compromise', he means uniting with them in order to obtain agreed, short-term or limited objectives. Such a compromise, he goes on to say,

should ‘in no way hamper the Communists in their ideological and political struggle’ (Lenin 1920).

In finding a ‘suitable form of compromise’, Trotskyists, particularly from the LCR, certainly continued to play a role in many different united fronts in the period after 1995. As a result of their concomitant involvement in political, trade union and wider social movements, activists from the LCR were described as being ‘militants multipositionnés’ (Joshua 2007, 44; Cadiou 2004, 127). The importance that the LCR gave to participating in these united fronts is highlighted by Rizet-Savoi (2006, 317), who maintains that they [LCR] are ‘sur tous les fronts et de tous les combats où ils estiment avoir un message à faire passer, un rôle à jouer, le plus souvent de radicalisation’. Jaffard, referring to the multiple forms that united fronts can encompass, argues that the tactic is indeed one which is still applicable and relevant for revolutionaries in the contemporary period:

> Le front unique n’est donc pas quelque chose de statique. … C’est au contraire une approche tactique à utiliser de façon constante à toutes les étapes de la lutte de classe, et dont la compréhension et l’utilisation judicieuse permet justement d’avancer d’une étape à l’autre (Jaffard 2008, 32).

This commitment to the united front tactic was maintained after the LCR dissolved and the NPA was established. The founding principles and statutes of the new organisation confirmed the importance and emphasis given to the united front:

> Nous sommes en faveur de mobilisations les plus unitaires possibles, associant tous les courants politiques, syndicaux, associatifs du mouvement social. Dans celles-ci, nous défendons le principe de l'auto-organisation : il est essentiel que ce soient celles et ceux qui agissent, qui décident de l'orientation, des formes de leurs luttes et de leur direction (NPA 2009, 10).

Further resolutions at the founding conference committed the NPA, without diluting its political positions, to initiate or participate in campaigns which brought together 'toutes celles et tous ceux ainsi que les organisations d'accord pour se mobiliser sur telle ou telle question' (NPA 2009, 28). The relevant sections in the founding principles were, in effect, a reiteration and an updating of the theory of the united front. Subsequent conversations with the author by members of the NPA, including national committee member Alain Krivine[178], confirmed that the new party would continue to accentuate the importance of the tactic. The implication was that NPA members should 'militer quotidiennement avec des salariés qui ne sont pas révolutionnaires mais qui veulent défendre leurs droits et leurs intérêts de travailleurs. C'est aussi militer pour l'unité syndicale.'[179] That the role of revolutionaries was to engage in united action with non-revolutionaries was a common element in the conversations and demonstrated by the following statement:

> On lutte au sein d'une même organisation (syndicale) pour des revendications communes avec des militant(e)s qui ne sont pas révolutionnaires. Ce qui permet de se donner plus de chances de gagner et en même temps de démontrer à l'ensemble des

[178] Founder of the LC (1969) and the LCR (1974), interviewed 19 February 2009.
[179] Author interview with Claude Rousset, NPA member and trade unionist (6 July 2010).

> syndiqués (on espère) que les révolutionnaires sont les meilleurs défenseurs des intérêts des salariés.[180]

Similarly to the LCR, the NPA makes reference to the idea of 'compromise' in order to build united fronts. 'En permanence, dans l'activité quotidienne, nous faisons des « compromis » pour mobiliser, agir ensemble, développer les luttes à partir du niveau de conscience des travailleurs' (Lemaître 2010, 10).

The NPA newspaper, *Tout est à nous*, has frequent articles calling for united front action by workers. Two will suffice as examples. On 30 July 2009 the newspaper carried an article calling for a 'front unique contre les licenciements' in response to 850 proposed job losses in the Alcatel-Lucent company. A more recent edition reported the decisions taken at the first annual conference of the party, one of which reaffirmed the basis of its united front policy:

> Contre toute « unité » programmatique avec les réformistes, le vrai front unique ouvrier suppose des revendications claires pour mobiliser les masses et inclut l'indépendance du parti, le devoir de dénoncer les impasses réformistes. (*Tout est à nous*, 24 February 2011).

As has been demonstrated above, both LO and the NPA continue to make use of the united front tactic. Both organisations see it as a way of mobilising rank-and-file workers and at the same time, as a way of attempting to influence workers with their political ideas. They see the united front tactic as making an effective, realistic and practical contribution towards their ultimate objective, which is to:

[180] Author interview with Ross Harrold, NPA member and trade unionist (10 February 2010).

> mettre en mouvement une majorité de la société dans une confrontation à différents niveaux avec la classe dirigeante, d'organiser la classe ouvrière comme force motrice de ce mouvement et de la gagner à une direction révolutionnaire (Godard 2009).

In conclusion therefore, I have explored in this study, through the examination of examples from three different periods of the twentieth century, the use of the united front tactic by Trotskyist militants within the French trade union movement. The development of the tactic was considered and an assessment of the success or otherwise of its implementation was made in each case. This showed that the tactic was an effective means of enabling Trotskyists to intervene successfully in the trade unions, particularly at a rank and file or local level, and in doing so, that they were able to contribute to the winning of industrial disputes. The degree to which contemporary Trotskyist activists have gained representative roles in present-day trade unions and the manner in which they organise their interventions, especially in relation to the continuing influence of the *Charte d'Amiens*, would be a rewarding avenue for further enquiry.

From the point of view of the Trotskyists, the united front tactic has always had an additional purpose, that of allowing them to build a receptive audience for their revolutionary political and social ideas. The case studies show that, at times, they achieved a measure of success with regards to this objective. They were able to gain a level of influence amongst a minority of workers and encourage them to break with previously held reformist ideas. Future research could be undertaken

which is able to quantify in detail the extent of this change in attitude and affiliation. The case studies also showed that the different Trotskyist parties were able to adapt the united front tactic according to changing social, economic and political circumstances. Since 1995 these varying circumstances have continued to result in situations where workers in France have felt obliged to protest and mobilise in order to defend or improve their working and living conditions. The number of days lost through industrial action has continued to climb. The average for the period 1998 – 2009 is now 132 compared to a European average of 30.6.[181]Trotskyists have been at the forefront of these contestations and as before have used the united front as an organisational and agitational tactic. At times the resulting united fronts have been on a small scale and created on the initiative of Trotskyist militants in workplaces with only a localised periphery of supporters. At other times, in response to more generalised and widespread mobilisations, Trotskyists have participated in and attempted to develop united fronts on a larger scale that have incorporated trade unionists at regional and national levels. The precise form of these united fronts being dependent upon the implantation of Trotskyist militants and their ability to influence both the leadership and rank and file activists involved. According to historian Christophe Bourseiller, Trotskyists from LO and the NPA have been able to have an influence in recent industrial and wider social movements because both organisations have become 'fortement prolétarisés'. He considers that '[i]l est naturel que l'extrême gauche soit présente dans ces conflits, puisque c'est sa marque de fabrique' (*Liberation*, 5 May 2009). This 'trade mark' is in fact the use of the united front tactic which militants effectively utilised, for example,

[181]See: European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/eiro/studies/tn1004049s/tn1004049s.htm

during the industrial disputes at Continental, Toyota and Peugeot in 2009[182]and throughout the 2010 mobilisations in defence of public sector pensions[183]. In doing so, contemporary Trotskyist parties and activists have confirmed the tactic to be still relevant, practical and effective. The ultimate objective for these activists is to bring about a revolutionary socialist transformation of society. It is evident that until or unless a revolution takes place, revolutionaries will only comprise a minority of the working class. This minority, in continuing to defend or improve social, working and living conditions at the same time as attempting to develop a revolutionary class consciousness, will be obliged to do so alongside other workers and trade unionists. While attempting to 'faire converger les luttes' (NPA 2010), revolutionaries will continue to have to unite with non-revolutionaries in united fronts and support 'concurrently every movement, however partial, of the toilers against the exploiters and against the bourgeois state' (Trotsky 1922).

[182] See: *Le Monde* (17 May 2009), *Liberation* (5 May 2009), *Lutte Ouvrière* (12 June 2009), *Tout est à nous* (14 May 2009).
[183] See: *Le Monde* (9 and 12 Oct 2010), *Lutte Ouvrière* (15 October 2010), *Tout est à nous* (27 October 2010).

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Note. Where possible online references show both URL and Hyperlink.

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Appendix 1.

Interviewees

Christophe Aguiton. Founder member of SUD-PTT, former member of LCR, responsible for international affairs in ATTAC. Interviewed 12 July 2007.

Denis Aguiton. Student activist. Political Science research student at the Université de Paris 8 Saint Denis. Correspondance, 25 May 2010. 7, 10 & 12 June 2010.

Josiane Baudoin. Daughter of Georges Chéron. Interviewed 30 May 2006.

Ronan le Berre. Trade unionist and member of NPA. Interviewed 10 April 2009, 27 May 2009, 16 March 2010.

Isabelle Borne. Trade union activist in SUD-Santé. Interviewed 10 August 2010.

Sylviane Charles. NPA coordinator for trade union work. Interviewed 28 October 2009.

Jean-René Chauvin (1918-2011). Veteran Trotskyist. Member of PCI, founder member of RDR, member of LCR. Interviewed 25 October 2005.

Bernard Douzil. Teacher trade unionist activist in SNES. Interviewed 5 August 2008.

Ross Harrold. NPA member, trade union activist in SNES. Interviewed 29 May 2008, 10 February 2010.

Alain Krivine. Founder of the LC and LCR, member of NPA. Interviewed 19 February 2009.

Yvan Lemaitre.	Member of NPA Central Committee. Interviewed 4 July 2009.
Elsa Petit-Hassan.	Trade unionist and LCR regional elections candidate. Interviewed 25 August 2008.
Anne-Marie Poupon.	Hospital worker. Interviewed 28 October 2010.
Claude Rousset.	NPA member and trade unionist. Interviewed 6 July 2010.
Phillippe.	Print worker, CGT activist and member of LO. Interviewed 22 February 2008.
Franck.	CGT activist, member of LO. Interviewed 21 February 2009.

Appendix 2.

La Charte d'Amiens (1906) [184]

Le Congrès confédéral d'Amiens confirme l'article 2, constitutif de la CGT. La CGT groupe en dehors de toute école politique, tous les travailleurs conscients de la lutte à mener pour la disparition du salariat et du patronat. Le congrès considère que cette déclaration est une reconnaissance de la lutte de classe qui oppose, sur le terrain économique, les travailleurs en révolte contre toutes les formes d'exploitation et d'oppression tant matérielle que morale, mises en œuvre par la classe capitaliste contre la classe ouvrière. Le congrès précise sur les points suivants cette affirmation théorique : Dans l'œuvre revendicatrice quotidienne, le syndicalisme poursuit la coordination des efforts ouvriers, l'accroissement du mieux-être des travailleurs par la réalisation d'améliorations immédiates, telle que la diminution des heures de travail, l'augmentation des salaires etc. Mais cette besogne n'est qu'un côté de l'œuvre du syndicalisme : il prépare l'émancipation intégrale, qui ne peut se réaliser que par l'expropriation capitaliste ; il préconise comme moyen d'action la grève générale et il considère que le syndicat, aujourd'hui groupement de résistance, sera dans l'avenir, le groupement de production et de répartition, base de réorganisation sociale. Le congrès déclare que cette double besogne, quotidienne et d'avenir, découle de la situation des salariés qui pèse sur la classe ouvrière et qui fait à tous les travailleurs quelles que soient leurs opinions ou leurs tendances politiques ou philosophiques, un devoir d'appartenir au groupement essentiel qu'est le syndicat. Comme conséquence, en ce qui concerne les individus, le congrès affirme l'entière liberté pour le syndiqué, de participer, en dehors du groupement corporatif, à telles formes de luttes correspondant à sa conception philosophique ou politique, se bornant à lui demander en réciprocité, de ne pas introduire dans le syndicat les opinions qu'il professe au dehors. En ce qui concerne les organisations, le congrès décide qu'afin que le syndicalisme atteigne son maximum d'effet, l'action

[184]Source: L'Institut CGT d'histoire sociale <http://www.ihs.cgt.fr/IMG/pdf_Charte_d_amiens.pdf> [accessed 06 January 2009]

économique doit s'exercer directement contre le patronat, les organisations confédérées n'ayant pas, en tant que groupements syndicaux, à se préoccuper des partis et des sectes qui, en dehors et à côté, peuvent en toute liberté poursuivre la transformation sociale.

Appendix 3.

Works by Trotsky after 1927 referring to the united front.

1930. (September). The Turn in the Communist International and the Situation in Germany.
<http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/germany/1930/300926.htm >

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<http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/germany/1931/310825.htm>

1931. (November). Germany, the Key to the International Situation
<http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/germany/1931/311126.htm>

1931. (December). For a Workers' United Front Against Fascism
<http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/germany/1931/311208.htm>

1932. (January). What Next? Vital Questions for the German Proletariat
<http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/germany/1932-ger/index.htm>

1932. (September). Germany: The Only Road
<http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/germany/1932/320914.htm>

1933. (February). The United Front for Defence. A Letter to a Social Democratic Worker <http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/germany/1933/330223.htm>

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1934. (June 10). War and the Fourth International
<http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1934/06/warfi.htm>

1934-1936. Whither France?
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1937. *The Lessons of Spain: The Last Warning*.
<http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1937/xx/spain01.htm>

All titles can be accessed at the Marxist Internet Archive.
<http://www.marxists.org/>

Appendix 4.

Theses on the conditions of admission to the Communist International[185]

The First Congress of the Communist International did not draw up precise conditions for admission to the Communist International. Until the time the first congress was convened there were in most countries only communist *trends* and *groups*. The Second Congress of the Communist International meets under different conditions. At the present time there are in most countries not only communist trends and tendencies, but communist *parties* and *organisations.*

Now parties and groups often turn to the Communist International which quite recently belonged to the Second International, which wish to join the Communist International but which have not, in fact, become communist. The Second International has been finally smashed to pieces. The parties in between and the 'centre' groups, which realise the hopelessness of the Second International, now try to lean upon the Communist International, which is becoming more and more powerful. In the process, however, they hope to retain an 'autonomy' that will permit them to continue their previous opportunist or 'centrist' policies. To a certain extent the Communist International is becoming fashionable.

The desire of certain leading 'centrist' groups to join the Communist International is an indirect confirmation of the fact that the Communist International has gained the sympathy of the overwhelming majority of class-conscious workers all over the world and that it is becoming a force that grows more powerful each day.

The Communist International is threatened by the danger of being watered down by elements characterised by vacillation and half-measures, which have not yet finally discarded the ideology of the Second International.

Moreover, to this very day there remains in some big parties (Italy, Sweden, Norway, Yugoslavia, among others), whose majorities have adopted the standpoint of communism, a significant reformist and social-pacifist wing which is only waiting for the opportunity to raise its head again, to start active sabotage of the proletarian revolution and thus to help the bourgeoisie and the Second International.

Not a single communist may forget the lessons of the Hungarian Soviet Republic. The fusion of the Hungarian communists with the so-called 'left' social democrats cost the Hungarian proletariat dear.

Consequently the Second Congress of the Communist International considers it necessary to establish quite precisely the conditions for the admittance of new

[185] Minutes of the Second Congress of the Communist International. Seventh Session, July 30 1919.
http://www.marxists.org/history/international/comintern/2nd-congress/ch07.htm

parties and to point out to those parties that have been admitted to the Communist International the duties incumbent on them.

The Second Congress of the Communist International lays down the following conditions of membership of the Communist International:

1. All propaganda and agitation must bear a really communist character and correspond to the programme and decisions of the Communist International. All the party's press organs must be run by reliable communists who have proved their devotion to the cause of the proletariat. The dictatorship of the proletariat must not be treated simply as a current formula learnt off by heart. Propaganda for it must be carried out in such a way that its necessity is comprehensible to every simple worker, every woman worker, every soldier and peasant from the facts of their daily lives, which must be observed systematically by our press and used day by day.
The periodical and other press and all the party's publishing institutions must be subordinated to the party leadership, regardless of whether, at any given moment, the party as a whole is legal or illegal. The publishing houses must not be allowed to abuse their independence and pursue policies that do not entirely correspond to the policies of the party.
In the columns of the press, at public meetings, in the trades unions, in the co-operatives – wherever the members of the Communist International can gain admittance – it is necessary to brand not only the bourgeoisie but also its helpers, the reformists of every shade, systematically and pitilessly.

2. Every organisation that wishes to affiliate to the Communist International must regularly and methodically remove reformists and centrists from every responsible post in the labour movement (party organisations, editorial boards, trades unions, parliamentary factions, co-operatives, local government) and replace them with tested communists, without worrying unduly about the fact that, particularly at first, ordinary workers from the masses will be replacing 'experienced' opportunists.

3. In almost every country in Europe and America the class struggle is entering the phase of civil war. Under such conditions the communists can place no trust in bourgeois legality. They have the obligation of setting up a parallel organisational apparatus which, at the decisive moment, can assist the party to do its duty to the revolution. In every country where a state of siege or emergency laws deprive the communists of the opportunity of carrying on all their work legally, it is absolutely necessary to combine legal and illegal activity.

4. The duty of propagating communist ideas includes the special obligation of forceful and systematic propaganda in the army. Where this agitation is interrupted by emergency laws it must be continued illegally. Refusal to carry out such work would be tantamount to a betrayal of revolutionary duty and would be incompatible with membership of the Communist International.

5. Systematic and methodical agitation is necessary in the countryside. The working class will not be able to win if it does not have the backing of the rural proletariat and at least a part of the poorest peasants, and if it does not secure the

neutrality of at least a part of the rest of the rural population through its policies. Communist work in the countryside is taking on enormous importance at the moment. It must be carried out principally with the help of revolutionary communist *workers* of the town and country who have connections with the countryside. To refuse to carry this work out, or to entrust it to unreliable, semi-reformist hands, is tantamount to renouncing the proletarian revolution.

6. Every party that wishes to belong to the Communist International has the obligation to unmask not only open social-patriotism but also the insincerity and hypocrisy of social-pacificism, to show the workers systematically that, without the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism, no international court of arbitration, no agreement on the limitation of armaments, no 'democratic' reorganisation of the League of Nations will be able to prevent new imperialist wars.

7. The parties that wish to belong to the Communist International have the obligation of recognising the necessity of a complete break with reformism and 'centrist' politics and of spreading this break among the widest possible circles of their party members. Consistent communist politics are impossible without this. The Communist International unconditionally and categorically demands the carrying out of this break in the shortest possible time. The Communist International cannot tolerate a situation where notorious opportunists, as represented by Turati, Modigliani, Kautsky, Hilferding, Hillquit, Longuet, MacDonald, etc., have the right to pass as members of the Communist International. This could only lead to the Communist International becoming something very similar to the wreck of the Second International.

8. A particularly marked and clear attitude on the question of the colonies and oppressed nations is necessary on the part of the communist parties of those countries whose bourgeoisies are in possession of colonies and oppress other nations. Every party that wishes to belong to the Communist International has the obligation of exposing the dodges of its 'own' imperialists in the colonies, of supporting every liberation movement in the colonies not only in words but in deeds, of demanding that their imperialist compatriots should be thrown out of the colonies, of cultivating in the hearts of the workers in their own country a truly fraternal relationship to the working population in the colonies and to the oppressed nations, and of carrying out systematic propaganda among their own country's troops against any oppression of colonial peoples.

9. Every party that wishes to belong to the Communist International must systematically and persistently develop communist activities within the trades unions, workers' and works councils, the consumer co-operatives and other mass workers' organisations. Within these organisations it is necessary to organise communist cells which are to win the trades unions etc. for the cause of communism by incessant and persistent work. In their daily work the cells have the obligation to expose everywhere the treachery of the social patriots and the vacillations of the 'centrists'. The communist cells must be completely subordinated to the party as a whole.

10. Every party belonging to the Communist International has the obligation to wage a stubborn struggle against the Amsterdam 'International' of yellow trade

union organisations. It must expound as forcefully as possible among trades unionists the idea of the necessity of the break with the yellow Amsterdam International. It must support the International Association of Red Trades Unions affiliated to the Communist International, at present in the process of formation, with every means at its disposal.

11. Parties that wish to belong to the Communist International have the obligation to subject the personal composition of their parliamentary factions to review, to remove all unreliable elements from them and to subordinate these factions to the party leadership, not only in words but also in deeds, by calling on every individual communist member of parliament to subordinate the whole of his activity to the interests of really revolutionary propaganda and agitation.

12. The parties belonging to the Communist International must be built on the basis of the principle of *democratic centralism.* In the present epoch of acute civil war the communist party will only be able to fulfil its duty if it is organised in as centralist a manner as possible, if iron discipline reigns within it and if the party centre, sustained by the confidence of the party membership, is endowed with the fullest rights and authority and the most far-reaching powers.

13. The communist parties of those countries in which the communists can carry out their work legally must from time to time undertake purges (re-registration) of the membership of their party organisations in order to cleanse the party systematically of the petty-bourgeois elements within it.

14. Every party that. wishes to belong to the Communist International has the obligation to give unconditional support to every soviet republic in its struggle against the forces of counter-revolution. The communist parties must carry out clear propaganda to prevent the transport of war material to the enemies of the soviet republics. They must also carry out legal or illegal propaganda, etc., with every means at their disposal among troops sent to stifle workers' republics.

15. Parties that have still retained their old social democratic programmes have the obligation of changing those programmes as quickly as possible and working out a new communist programme corresponding to the particular conditions in the country and in accordance with the decisions of the Communist International. As a rule the programme of every party belonging to the Communist International must be ratified by a regular Congress of the Communist International or by the Executive Committee. Should the Executive Committee of the Communist International reject a party's programme, the party in question has the right of appeal to the Congress of the Communist International.

16. All decisions of the Congresses of the Communist International and decisions of its Executive Committee are binding on all parties belonging to the Communist International. The Communist International, acting under conditions of the most acute civil war, must be built in a far more centralist manner than was the case with the Second International. In the process the Communist International and its Executive Committee must, of course, in the whole of its activity, take into account the differing conditions under which the individual

parties have to fight and work, and only take generally binding decisions in cases where such decisions are possible.

17. In this connection all those parties that wish to belong to the Communist International must change their names. Every party that wishes to belong to the Communist International must bear the name *Communist* Party of this or that country (Section of the Communist International). The question of the name is not formal, but a highly political question of great importance. The Communist International has declared war on the whole bourgeois world and on all yellow social-democratic parties. The difference between the communist parties and the old official 'social-democratic' or 'socialist' parties that have betrayed the banner of the working class must be clear to every simple toiler.

18. All the leading press organs of the parties in every country have the duty of printing all the important official documents of the Executive Committee of the Communist International.

19. All parties that belong to the Communist International or have submitted an application for membership have the duty of calling a special congress as soon as possible, and in no case later than four months after the Second Congress of the Communist International, in order to check all these conditions. In this connection all party centres must see that the decisions of the Second Congress are known to all their local organisations.

20. Those parties that now wish to enter the Communist International but have not yet radically altered their previous tactics must, before they join the Communist International, see to it that no less than two thirds of the central committee and of all their most important central institutions consist of comrades who even before the Second Congress of the Communist International spoke out unambiguously in public in favour of the entry of the party into the Communist International. Exceptions may be permitted with the agreement of the Executive Committee of the Communist International. The Executive Committee of the Communist International also has the right to make exceptions in relation to the representatives of the centrist tendency mentioned in paragraph 7.

21. Those party members who fundamentally reject the conditions and Theses laid down by the Communist International are to be expelled from the party.

Appendix 5.

Archives and Libraries consulted

Archives de la Mairie des Lilas, 96, rue de Paris 93260 Les Lilas. Tél: +33 (0)1 72 03 17 37.
http://www.ville-leslilas.fr/quotidien/place_annu.php?id_place=266

Archives du Monde du Travail, 78, Boulevard du Général Leclerc, 59100 Roubaix. Tél: +33 (0)3 20 65 38 00
http://www.archivesnationales.culture.gouv.fr/camt/index.html

Archives Municipales de Levallois. 26, rue Clément-Bayard, 92300 Levallois. Tél: +33 (0)1 55 46 81 76.
http://www.ville-levallois.fr/Hotel-de-Ville/Archives-municipales

Archives du PCF (1921 -1994). Archives Départementales de la Seine-Saint-Denis. 18, Ave du Président Salvador Allende, 93000 Bobigny. Tél: +33 (0)1 43 93 97 00.
http://www.seine-saint-denis.fr/-Archives-departementales-.html

Archives de la Préfecture de Police, 4, rue de la Montagne Sainte-Geneviève 75005 Paris. Tél: +33 (0)1 44 41 52 50
http://www.prefecturedepolice.interieur.gouv.fr/La-prefecture-de-police/Service-de-la-memoire-et-des-affaires-culturelles/Les-archives-de-la-prefecture-de-police

Association RADAR. 2 rue Richard Lenoir, 93100 Montreuil. Tél: +33 (0)1 48 70 42 30
RaDAR | Rassembler, diffuser les archives de révolutionnaires

Bibliothèque centrale de l'Université Paris Diderot, 59, quai Panhard et Levassor Paris 75013. Tél: +33 (0)1 57 27 66 00
http://bibliotheque.univ-paris-diderot.fr/bibliotheque-centrale/accueil-1.html

Bibliothèque de documentation internationale contemporaine (BDIC) l'Université de Paris X-Nanterre. Tél: +33 (0)1 40 97 79 00
http://www.bdic.fr/index.php?option=com_content&view=frontpage&Itemid=1

Bibliothèque Jean Maitron, Centre d'histoire sociale (CHS) du XXe siècle. 9, rue Malher, 75004 Paris. Tél: +33 (0)1 44 78 33 87.
http://histoire-sociale.univ-paris1.fr/index.htm

Bibliothèque nationale de France. Site François-Mitterrand, Quai François-Mauriac. 75706 Paris. Tél: +33 (0)1 53 79 59 59.
http://www.bnf.fr/default.htm

Bodleian Library, Oxford. Tel: +44 (0)1865 277162.
http://www.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/bodley/home

British Library, St Pancras, 96 Euston Road, London NW1 2DB. Tel: +44 (0)20 7412 7676
http://www.bl.uk/

Centre d'études, de documentation, d'information et d'action sociales - Musée social (CEDIAS), 5, rue Las Cases, 75007 Paris. Tél: +33 (0)1 45 51 66 10.
http://www.cedias.org/dossiers/cat.php?idcat=73

Centre d'Etudes et de Recherches sur les Mouvements Trotskyste et Révolutionnaires Internationaux {CERMTRI), 28 rue des Petites Ecuries, 75010 Paris. Tél: +33 (0)1 44 83 00 00.
http://www.trotsky.com.fr/

Centre de recherches politiques de Sciences Po (CEVIPOF), 98, rue de l'Université - 75007 Paris. Tél: +33 (0)1 45 49 51 05
http://www.cevipof.com/fr/

IHS CGT Métallurgie, 94, rue J-P. Timbaud, 75011 Paris. Tél:. +33 (0)1 53 36 86 39

Institut CGT d'Histoire Sociale. 263 rue de Paris, 93516 Montreuil.
Tél: +33 (0)1 48 18 84 90.
http://www.ihs.cgt.fr/

Librairie La Brèche, 27, rue Taine 75012 Paris. Tél: +33 (0)1 49 28 52 44.
http://www.la-breche.com/catalog/

Library of the Maison Française d'Oxford, 2-10 Norham Road, Oxford OX2 6SE Tel: +44 (0) 1865 274 224
http://www.mfo.ac.uk/en/resources/library

Lubitz' TrotskyanaNet. http://www.trotskyana.net/

Le Maitron.org , 17 rue de Tolbiac, 75013 Paris.
http://biosoc.univ-paris1.fr/

The Marxist Internet Archive.
http://www.marxists.org/

University of Warwick Library, Gibbet Hill Road, Coventry CV4 7AL. Tel: +44 (0)2476 522 026
http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/services/library/main/